

**Glass and Place**  
**Using Properties of the One to Reflect (on)**  
**Qualities of the Other**

**An Effort of Attention**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
the Royal College of Art for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2017  
Royal College of Art  
London UK



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## **Abstract**

Everything that happens takes place somewhere, in a particular physical or cultural space. The character of a place is constituted, its distinctive timbre generated, by the constellations of events occurring in it and how those blend, interweave and play out over time. Such textural qualities infuse and inform our experience of places, they shape our 'knowing' at a visceral level that goes unnoticed in our ordinary lives. Our conscious awareness of the places and spaces we visit and inhabit is filtered by our interests, honed through habit, marshalled and constrained by conventional perceptions of what matters. The contingent qualities of places beyond the purposes they serve for us are rarely considered and harder to attend to. But if we want to appreciate the world in its own right, not just in ours, finding ways to do so seems worthwhile.

Artists adopt a variety of strategies to penetrate beyond the more obvious features of place. Some seek estrangement through the systematic application of arbitrary rules, others through strenuous efforts of will. I use ways of looking and thinking that are grounded in my experience of training as a glassmaker and developed using photography and video. My approach employs a broadly defined 'glass sensibility' that encompasses both the physical abilities of glass to mediate visual perception and their metaphorical correlates as shapers of ideas.

My mode of enquiry is the essay, a flexible and open-ended form of reflexive investigation that is highly attentive and responsive to its subject matter, and follows where that leads. But unlike other essayists who pursue their trains of thought in lines of words, my attempts at understanding are more visual. I explore my chosen places - a bus, a train, a road junction, a kitchen, a forest, a park, a desert - by spending periods of time in them doing whatever being there generally involves whilst also noticing how things happen and taking photographs. What I'm looking out for are telling facets, small examples of conjunctions of events which I can somehow 'cut and polish' at the critical angle that aids transparency, letting

light in on the intrinsic character of the place and making it sparkle. The substantive outcomes of these essays are new awarenesses that bypass language; but each is accompanied and supported in the thesis by a textual account of how it came about.

The contributions made by this thesis are three-fold: It expands the repertoire of strategies for appreciating place, develops a novel understanding of how glass-based thinking may inform processes of exploration and offers a new, more literal, version of essayistic reflection.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Lesley Grayson for giving me the courage required to follow the glass in the first place. Thanks are due to Rob Marshall, Dan Bailey and Anne Marie Rafferty for their encouragement and practical help. I am indebted to Alison Britton and Annie Cattrell for their interest in the project and wise advice. Having them as my supervisors has been a privilege and pleasure. Mark McCarthy has been unendingly tolerant and supportive, and I thank him too.

**Author's declaration**

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Signature

Date

1<sup>st</sup> September 2017

## 1 Introduction

This project is about appreciating 'place'. Appreciation, according to the dictionary, involves recognition, enjoyment and a clear understanding of something's qualities, particularly its aesthetic qualities. It is a process of adding value and also an expression of gratitude. Places, to my mind, deserve more appreciation than they generally receive and I think that if ways can be found to change that, experience of the world will be enriched. But how to do this is something that has puzzled me for years. The thesis presented here is not my first attempt at tackling this challenge and probably will not be the last, but it is the most sustained to date.

My aims in this introductory chapter are three-fold. The first is to better define the focus of this project through outlining and exploring the complexities of place. I consider what places are, how we perceive them, how these perceptions tend to limit our view and why I see that as a pity. The second is to explain how the present project came about and why I have approached it using glass. The third is to set out the structure and format of the rest of the thesis and associated materials, so that the reader has an idea of what to expect.

### What is place

A place as commonly understood, according to Thomas Gieryn,<sup>1</sup> is a more or less formally bounded site with three distinctive attributes: geographical location, physical form, and meaning and value associated with its uses and purposes and how it is imagined. Places belong to us, conceptually, and we belong in them. The world for each of us is a shifting constellation of places, shared and private, familiar and less so, loved and reviled, that serve as frames for our activities and settings for our dreams. We act on places, creating, shaping, nurturing and destroying them, but of course the direction of influence is not one way - places themselves have agency and do similar things to us. And as we move from one place to another we

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Gieryn, 'A Space for Place in Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000), 463-96.

ignore the transitional 'spaces' passed through on the way, not because they are empty of content or activities, but because what happens in them is not 'owned' by us or seen to matter.

But while places are defined and sustained through human understanding, the world itself keeps going on regardless of what we think. Self-constructing through the continuing flow of multiple events 'from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny', 'it is always in the process of being made [...] never finished; never closed'.<sup>2</sup> The resulting bubbling brew of existence is a mix of absolutely everything that happens, planned and unplanned, meaningful and not. In the words of Nigel Thrift, 'all kinds of hybrids are being continually recast by processes of circulation within and between particular spaces. The world is made up of all kinds of things brought in to relation with one another [...] through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter'.<sup>3</sup> And places are not exempt or insulated from this on-flow of events. Quite the contrary, places are porous, part of, shot through by the whole meshwork<sup>4</sup> of contingent activity, and it is this that makes their texture so extraordinarily rich. If the warp of meaning provides stability and coherence, the weft of happenings adds movement, liveliness, and surprise. Like shot silk, the combination shimmers and glitters unpredictably.

In our moment-by-moment existence we encounter the world like this. Its multifaceted, open-ended plenitude is effortlessly familiar, un-worrying and powerful. It tilts and colours our feelings and shapes our sense of where we are at a visceral level that bypasses language. But in our conscious noticing we are generally far more pedestrian, cleaving to the substance and ignoring the flash. Our perceptions are filtered and constrained by the traditions, conventions, habits and biases of the various 'attentional communities'<sup>5</sup> to which we belong, as well as by our individual

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<sup>2</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Nigel Thrift, 'Space', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23 (2006), 139-55 (p. 139).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 64. Ingold defines 'meshworks' as lines of action in a world of threads and pathways, as distinct from 'networks', which he sees as lines of connection in a world of heterogeneous bits and pieces.

<sup>5</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 52.

circumstances and interests. We focus on what we see as relevant, recognise what we expect and generally disregard the rest as extraneous ‘stuff’, though of course the filters are not absolute. The ‘background “hum”’,<sup>6</sup> the immaterial (in both senses) and the unnamed aspects of the world’s on-going activity leak into our awareness at unguarded moments and turn up in our dreams, but they are tantalisingly elusive and slippery to grasp.

Over the past few decades an extensive critique has been developed, mostly in the field of cultural geography, about the risks and limitations associated with how we generally think of and about place. The perception of places as bounded entities, objects with meaning, makes them seem, it is argued, more certain and substantive than actually they are. We reify their boundaries, over-play their separateness, relate to them in binary terms - inside/outside, this place/that place – and correspondingly under-acknowledge all the cross-cutting links and continuities that transcend those borders. In the interests of everything from nationalism to marketing to simply feeling personally secure, we over-simplify, perceiving places as stable phenomena with ‘singular, fixed and static identities’,<sup>7</sup> and under-estimating or ignoring their status as ‘multiple objects’<sup>8</sup> with multiple meanings, fuzzy, contested, changeable and overlapping in both space and time. And it is not just a matter of faulty understanding - much of the time, it has been pointed out, we do not notice place *at all*: ‘The potency of place lies in the ways it becomes taken for granted as a context for everyday life, its forgotten-ness’.<sup>9</sup>

The moral and political consequences of this myopic view of place have been well elaborated. They include a hubristic over-confidence in our agency and ability to control things, a lack of insight into and respect for alternative value systems and concerns that differ from our own, including both other human and other-than-

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, ‘The Promise of Non-Representational Theories’ in *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, ed. by Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 1-36 (p. 8).

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (London: Polity Press, 1994), p. 168.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Metzger, ‘The Subject of Place: Staying with the Trouble’, in *Emergent Urbanism*, ed. by Tigran Haas and Krister Olsson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 91-99 (p. 95).

<sup>9</sup> Kim Dovey, *Becoming Places* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 7.

human interests, and flawed policymaking based on distorted and inadequate analyses. And in response a range of philosophical and theoretical approaches and novel research strategies have been envisaged and developed that aim to better conceptualise, acknowledge and accommodate the open-ended, unpredictable, multi-dimensional dynamics of place, the flows, sequences, conjunctions and collisions of planned and unplanned events, including occurrences that have no name or status and little tangible presence.<sup>10</sup>

While acknowledging and accepting all of the above, my own disquiet about the effects of our limited perceptions is more immediate and personal. I am frustrated by the knowledge that I (we) notice so much less of the amazing character of places than is potentially available; and that since most of my (our) noticing is repetitive and conventional, my (our) awareness must inevitably be thin and stale. Social scientists are concerned to understand place differently in order that other problems - planning cities, living with our neighbours, protecting ecosystems - may be dealt with better. My wish to do so has a less focused purpose. I find myself more aligned with the poets, who strain against 'the 'clichés' of opinion' simply 'so as to let in a breath of air'.<sup>11</sup> DH Lawrence states the matter rather grandly:

The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and 'discovers' a new world within the known world. Man, and the animals, and the flower, all live within a strange and forever surging chaos [...] but man cannot live in chaos. The animals can. To the animal, all is chaos, only there are a few recurring motions and aspects within the surge. And the animal is content. But man is not. Man must wrap himself in a vision, make a house of apparent form and stability, fixity. In his terror of chaos, he begins by putting up an umbrella between himself and the everlasting chaos. Then he paints the underside of his umbrella like a firmament. Then he parades around, lives, and dies under his umbrella. Bequeathed to his descendants the

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies*, ed. by Tim Edensor (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). See also Anderson and Harrison.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. by H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), p. 204.

umbrella becomes a dome, a vault, and men at last begin to feel that something is wrong. Man fixes some wonderful erection of his own between himself and the wild chaos, and gradually goes bleached and stifled under his parasol. Then comes a poet, enemy of convention, and makes a slit in the umbrella; and lo! the glimpse of chaos is a vision, a window to the sun.<sup>12</sup>

Though I would like to appreciate place better for myself, I do not see the struggle to do so as a purely private matter. It is the richness of our world-in-common that interests me, not my own. But sharing this with others is a whole separate challenge. John-David Dewsbury summarises both the difficulty and the goal:

We apprehend that inaccessible quality but for a fleeting moment and through a personal register, which means that after the experience we find it difficult to testify and be its witness [...] And yet there is the hope that in such felt capture we are not alone, that it can be made to make sense for other people, that there is a line of [...] shared appreciation.<sup>13</sup>

In later chapters I review some of the strategies that others have adopted to try and address both aspects of the challenge, and outline my own approach in the present project. But before that here, as background, a brief account of two earlier attempts to attend to place in a different way. Both date from when I was first at art school in Bristol many years ago.

### **Earlier attempts**

In the west of England at that time there was a strong current of curiosity, a kind of secular mysticism, about the perceived potency of certain places in the countryside.

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<sup>12</sup> D.H. Lawrence, 'Chaos in Poetry: Introduction to "Chariot of the Sun" by Harry Crosby', in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D.H. Lawrence: Introductions and Reviews*, ed. by N.H. Reeve and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 107-16 (p. 107), (first publ. in 1928).

<sup>13</sup> John-David Dewsbury, 'Witnessing Space: 'Knowledge Without Contemplation'', *Environment and Planning* 35 (2003), 1907-32 (p. 1910).

A recent book by John Michell<sup>14</sup> had stirred new interest in Alfred Watkins' idea of 'ley-lines',<sup>15</sup> a posited network of ancient track ways and landscape features aligning sites of longstanding spiritual and cultural power. My friend and I, though sceptical, were intrigued by the possibility of some unknown lattice of significance, and it seemed an interesting focus for our summer project. So we roamed the Somerset countryside armed with a ruler, a one-inch map and a portable cassette recorder, painstakingly identifying ley-line-related hot spots in fields, on tumuli and in churchyards. Our plan (not wholly tongue-in-cheek) was to tap into the concealed energies in those locations by recording the ambient sounds, and we climbed through brambles and braved herds of cows to do so. By the end of term we had an impressive bank of two-minute tapes of acoustic environments that sounded mainly blank and were more or less impossible to tell apart. To us this hardly mattered, they were the authentic documentation of our pursuit of an idea and a reminder of everything we had done, felt and encountered in those places. From everyone else's point of view they were, of course, just blank tapes.

Three years later I tried something else. The work for my degree show comprised a series of paintings of ordinary rooms in un-peopled states. (fig. 01) I wanted to explore their emptiness, to get a handle on what happens in a place when it is not 'in use'. I painted:

- A bedroom with no owner, between past and future tenants
- A study, whose occupant had gone next door to make a cup of coffee
- A kitchen after breakfast, once everyone had left for work
- The rarely visited preserved-in-aspic kitchen of an historic town house

I spied on these rooms and painted what I saw with documentary precision, pondering as I did so on their ambiguous status as vacated spaces in un-witnessed

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<sup>14</sup> John Michell, *The View over Atlantis* (London: Sago Press, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Markstones* (London: Methuen, 1925).



states of being. (The paradox of my own presence behind the paintbrush was conveniently bracketed out in my mind.)



*fig. 01. 'After Breakfast' 1976, egg tempera on canvas, 20" x 15"*

Others liked the paintings, but not for the reasons I hoped. Where I saw an unsupervised moment, they saw a still life. Ignoring the absence of people, they focused on the presence of things - papers on the floor, a glowing fireplace, a

teaspoon, a box of cereal. In the empty bedroom where there were few things to see they admired the floorboards, window frames and shadows. As an attempt to stir up ideas about what happens in a place when nobody is there my pictures clearly did not work. Disheartened I gave them away, stopped painting and withdrew from the front line of direct looking. I switched to studying sociology and exploring things at one remove, investigating how the world is experienced through other people's eyes.

For years afterwards I worked in universities as a teacher and researcher, exploring the views and practices of doctors and policymakers and evaluating their impact on the quality of health care. As a critical observer I saw how people's professional interests shape their awareness and behaviour<sup>16</sup> and how these are also influenced by qualities of place.<sup>17</sup> But the work was frustrating. In relation to place in particular I was pushing against the grain, since sociology - scientific, word-bound, and visually illiterate - has neither the inclination nor the analytic tools to seriously engage with its complexities.<sup>18</sup> In other ways, too, the self-imposed strictures of academic research were irksome and I was doubtful about the value and impact of what I did. So when I reached a point where I could afford to I decided to stop engaging with the world through publishing reports and return to using my eyes and hands directly, though this time not with paint. Instead I wanted to make unambiguously useful, beautiful, physical things in glass.

At the point where this project started I was well on the way, still half the week in London completing a high profile international study about errant doctors, but the other half in Dorset - a trainee glassblower sweating in a hot glass studio. This, I

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<sup>16</sup> See for example, Charlotte Humphrey, 'Ways of Seeing: Biomedical Perspectives on the Social World', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99 (2006), 602-06.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Charlotte Humphrey, 'Place, Space and Reputation: The Changing Role of Harley Street in English Health Care' *Social Theory & Health* 2 (2004), 153-69.

<sup>18</sup> As Gieryn points out, 'place' in sociology is a highly attenuated concept, useful for circumscribing population samples or generating comparative cases, but stripped of character by being defined in terms of standardised numerical variables. It is frequently reduced to the status of a passive backdrop for something else more interesting, or to a generic administrative unit (the bed, the ward, the hospital etc.).

thought, would be my future. It was exciting, challenging and exhausting and I was exceptionally cheerful. Having made the break from academia I had no plans to embark on more research. But then, once again, I started thinking about places, and from that point onwards one thing led to another until I arrived at where I am now, writing up this doctoral thesis.

### **Origins of the present project**

In the 1930s, the painter and author Marion Milner wrote about the distinction she perceived between 'narrow attention' (purpose-driven, focused on what matters) and 'wide attention' (open, non-judgmental, de-centred) as contrasting modes of experiencing the world. She tried to identify conditions that facilitated her own transition to the second, wider mode:

[It] seemed to depend on external conditions or a casual phrase. There were all the times [...] when I had chanced upon it, when sometimes tiredness seemed to lull one's purposes, sometimes mellow weather, sometimes alcohol. Then I would perhaps suddenly find myself breathing deeply in the calm impersonality of shapes or colours, or even in a sudden glimpse of someone's character seen from a view-point that had stepped clear of the distortions of my personal interests. And once when I was lying, weary and bored with myself, on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean, I had said, 'I want nothing', and immediately the landscape dropped its picture-postcard garishness and shone with a gleam from the first day of creation, even the dusty weeds by the roadside.'<sup>19</sup>

Whether in my case it was elation, tiredness, or simply the result of letting my concentration lapse after intensive sessions of handling highly sensitive data or trying to control intransigent glass I do not know, but for whatever reason, something similar occurred. In the gaps and spaces between my two lives there

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<sup>19</sup> Marion Milner, *A Life of One's Own* (Hove: Chatto & Windus, 1934), p. 79.

were several occasions, each fleetingly brief, when I felt de-centred from my own surroundings, becoming a disinterested observer of the broad unfolding of events in which I was a mere bit player, the main protagonist being the world itself. Glimpsed like that, conventional hierarchies of meaning set aside, the rich, impersonal, idiosyncratic character of the places and spaces where these moments occurred seemed to be revealed with fascinating clarity. My noticing was a bit different from Milner's, more musical than painterly, more happenings than objects, relationships in time as well as space but, like her, I was struck by the sensory qualities of the conjunctions and concurrences I noted as much as by their dispositional arrangements.

Searching later for a way to define my interest I chanced on the term 'timbral texture'.<sup>20</sup> Texture, in the musical sense, is the distinctive character of a piece - an emergent quality that is generated over time by the combination and integration of all that happens in it. The character of a place is created, likewise, by the interweaving of various strands of action:

The singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those [...] relations at that location (their partly happenstance conjunction) will in turn produce new [...] effects.<sup>21</sup>

The timbral dimension is the part of musical texture that relates to the sensuous quality of the sound, as distinct from the melodic, rhythmic or dynamic aspects of the music. It comes from the instruments and how they are played, as much as from the character of what is played on them. It cannot be accounted for in musical notation. And it was something equivalent - the timbre of place - that had me momentarily transfixed.

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<sup>20</sup> Roger E. Bissell, 'On "Musical Texture"', <<http://www.rogerbissell.com/id11e.html>> [accessed 18 July 2016]

<sup>21</sup> Massey, 1994, p. 168.

I wrote down my observations as short vignettes, knowing as I did so that rendering them into linear narratives traduced the experience just as surely as tape and paint had done on previous occasions. But that was irrelevant since the notes were only for myself; I was not trying to communicate to anybody else.

*- Crossing Waterloo Bridge by bike each winter evening, around 8pm. Beaching safely at the northern end on the thin spit of white-striped tarmac that opens up between the bus and vehicle lanes. Poised in the space between the two. Fragile, protected not by strength, speed, helmet or other armour, just luminous yellow netting and my own and other drivers' care. The whole encounter intensified by the dark and wet, squeezing and hustling along the skimpy narrows that everyone has to share during tedious weeks of major resurfacing work.*

*- On my bike again, leaning into the pleasure of a calculated arc around a familiar corner. Swooping towards a place on the road where currently there is a car but where, by the time I reach it, I know there will be a space. The un-choreographed arabesques, speeding, slowing, entwining and enforced stops and starts of all the different road users, characterized almost always, excepting in catastrophes, by passing and missing, untouched. These gracious dances, viscerally familiar to everyone who participates in them, show up as clichéd flares of trailing light in time-lapse photos. But, otherwise, they are rarely noted or remarked.*

*- On the tube in the morning, an unlikely burst of cheery girls, noisy, chatty, red and cream, perfect and confident, straight from a 1930s' school story not read since my childhood. Chirpy and bright, oblivious to the surroundings and the rest of us already sitting there. They came and went, all in a couple of stops.*

*- In St James' Piccadilly, as it happens, though this is a feature of all urban, church-based concerts where the walls are permeable to sound. The conjunction of the violin, harp and a passing emergency vehicle siren - commonalities of pitch and tone, but absolute difference in terms of everything else, purpose, skill etc.*

*- Another, similar, St Paul's, Covent Garden. An orchestra inside playing Mozart. Street entertainers outside doing something that we couldn't see. The applause outside randomly coincident with the inside music. Once or twice a good fit, and then, momentarily, the conductor, audience and musicians noted it, smiled. Mostly, though, that evidence of another, outside world was simply noise, dismissed and ignored or mildly irritant. And, had we been in the crowd outside, I expect the concert within would have been inaudible.*

*- In Charing Cross tube station, on a train in the platform. Continuous sound from an unseen busker, a flautist, patterns and fills the whole environment like the tracery of shadows from sun through trees. This against the background hum, fuggy smell and soft, musty dark of the tunnels. And patched onto both, a voice on the Tannoy – one that is regularly encountered when passing through that station - rich West African French-accented bursts of speech about planned engineering works in the coming weekend: "Ladies and gentlemen..."*

*- Morning sounds through my bedroom window, their creators all unseen. Scrape, scratch, ringing and layering of unconnected pulses, punctuations and rumbles – near and far, central and peripheral, different kinds of periodicity. Here is a list: snatches of speech and shouts to dogs; luggage wheeled along the road; distant sirens of all sorts; white noise of city traffic; sometimes, near and more persistent, a car alarm repetitively nee-nawing; birds; planes; the rubbish lorry harrumphing and snorting as it grinds down the far side of the gardens and back up past our house. The sounds map the space and distances like echoes in*

*a cathedral, their phased arrival and disappearance reflecting the position and topography of this particular spot. Sometimes there are also internal sounds - ringing in my ears, breathing or turning of another person, hum of the radiators, water in the pipes.*

*- The same window, from 7.45 to 8.00am. Nine planes go past consecutively, each one's sound in turn emerging, growing, hanging, falling slowly (in pitch) and fading away. The sound detached in time from the sight, which comes later if at all (not when it's cloudy). The evidence of what was there in the vapour trail, and its gradual relaxation and re-absorption. The history of the past few minutes inscribed on the sky. Sometimes the trails cross. And the sound varies according to the weather and time of year – the best indicating, without even opening my eyes, the arrival of a fine, high July day.*

And that would probably have been the end of the matter, but for the fact that alongside learning glassblowing I was also investigating other glass techniques and had to think of things to make for various practical exercises. I was perversely determined to distance myself from the type of glassmaking that is straightforwardly decorative, the standard glass class repertoire of birds, hearts and skeleton leaves. The vignettes that were rattling around in my mind seemed, by contrast, attractively obscure and pleasingly challenging to represent. So I boldly set about making them in the warm glass workshops, attempting first a translucent concert hall wall fused in layers and then a cast glass bend-in-the-road with momentum and velocity. In the process I learned about the difficulties of cutting sheet glass and programming a kiln, but the results were disappointing, unconvincing and inert.

Despite my continuing enthusiasm for glass, I was becoming restless. The making processes were marvellously engaging, but my skills remained inadequate. In the United States the artist Tim Tate launched a whole new movement - Glass Secessionism (see Chapter 3) - partly because he wanted 'to not be the second best goblet maker'.<sup>22</sup> Being myself not even a third rate maker of goblets, I shared Tate's 'desire to take glass further' in a different way. But where he chose to write a manifesto I gave up on form. Unhappy with most of the pieces I had blown, I broke them up and started looking not at but through the shards. I saw that what glass could achieve in an intermediary role was far more interesting than anything I could make with it as a finished object, and I needed a way to act on this discovery.

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<sup>22</sup> Tim Tate, 'Tenets of Glass Secessionism', 10 July 2013, <<https://washingtonglass.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/glass-secessionism.html>> [accessed 26 July 2016]



And then one day a new idea occurred: Rather than using my observations about place as casual subject matter for learning to make glass, how would it be to do the opposite, to switch the status of agent and object? Might glass itself be used instead as a means to explore qualities of place? Could its properties be co-opted to facilitate not just my own but also other people's noticing more successfully than my earlier attempts (described above)?

There are many points of correspondence, morphological similarities of character, between the protean qualities of glass as a substance and the slippery eventfulness of place. The disordered character of glass at a molecular level; its ambiguous status as both liquid and solid, and neither; its apparent immateriality and edgeless-ness; its capacity to affect and interact with events and objects nearby and at a distance; its liveliness, fragility and unpredictability; its sheer glow - all of these features have their notional equivalents in the happenings of place. And though the glass/place resemblance is ultimately as fanciful as the doctrine of signatures between plants and illnesses<sup>23</sup> or the links between image and effect in sympathetic magic, it might perhaps be used like them to work wonders through imaginative engagement.

Beside the substantive character of glass, there are also all its optical capacities - its ability to mediate and enhance perceptions, both physically through lens or mirror and conceptually through the processes of metaphorical reflection. These properties have been successfully exploited down through history to reach what otherwise cannot be seen, from reflecting inwards on the soul to gazing out beyond the visible universe and even probing the future. And if glass and glass-based thinking can do all that, then it clearly has potential on a more mundane level to facilitate appreciation of things that go on right before our noses, concealed by mere habits of mind.

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<sup>23</sup> The doctrine of signatures was an important aspect of folk medicine from the Middle Ages until the early modern period. Often associated with the work of herbalists and wise women, it drew upon the belief that natural objects that looked like a part of the body could cure diseases that would arise there. Science Museum, 'Doctrine of Signatures', <<http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/techniques/doctrine>> [accessed 28 July 2016]

And then there is transparency, both the actual see-throughness of glass and the near invisibility that goes with its ubiquitous presence and taken-for-granted status in the world. Whether in windows, cameras or the very structures of our thought, its agency goes largely unremarked. The problem with the paint in my earlier pictures was that it drew attention to all the wrong things, including both it and me. Glass mediates experience more discreetly and directly, and this was another property I thought I could use.

Doing a PhD by practice would not have occurred to me, but when one of my glass teachers suggested it I saw how the format could fit the idea. The expectation of integrating the substantive and conceptual, looking and thinking, making and writing - reflecting and reflecting *on* - would nicely accommodate the 'both/and' character of both glass and place. And it might also resolve the problem of my own peculiar hybrid nature (too visual to be happy as an academic, too preoccupied with thinking to be a productive maker), by bringing everything together in a single focus that could draw on all aspects of my interests and experience. So, rather unexpectedly, that became the plan.

Borrowing a term from Nigel Thrift, the aim of my project would be to seek 'new a-wherenesses'<sup>24</sup> of places - to access and capture aspects of their timbral textures - using glass and glass-based thinking as stimulus and resource. What this would actually mean in practice I could not yet envisage. My purpose was to find that out, through an open-ended 'effort of attention' made in the spirit of the poets described by Lawrence. This approach would be quite different from my own previous doctoral studies in health policy and those of other social science students I had supervised. I knew from past experience how modes of inquiry shape perceptions; every discipline and field of practice has its conventions about what matters and how best to proceed. Such habits enable a coherent focus, but they do so by pre-emptive selection, ignoring alternative or unanticipated possibilities and thereby inevitably limiting the view. In this project, I planned to evade that hazard

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<sup>24</sup> Thrift, p. 140.



by following my subject and allowing the places themselves to set the terms. Just as textures of place are emergent, fluid and unpredictable, comprised of and generating 'all kinds of hybrids',<sup>25</sup> so too would be my methods. The approach would be permissive, I would work with glass and its perceptual correlates in any register, physical or conceptual, which I believed could contribute to the exploration. But I would not be bound by that commitment. If other materials turned out to be appropriate, I would not hesitate to use them too. The rigour of the project would come from critical consideration and truthful documentation of my investigative forays and decisions. The contribution to knowledge if the enterprise proved worthwhile would be a worked through addition to the repertoire of strategies for appreciating place and a novel understanding of how glass-based thinking may inform processes of exploration.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The next two chapters set this project in a wider context in two different ways.

Chapter 2 focuses on the subject matter. It examines and compares the approaches taken by a range of other people (artists, writers and a composer) who share an interest in paying and drawing attention to textural qualities of place.

Chapter 3 focuses on the material. It explores the properties of glass and the diverse ways in which these have been exploited for general and artistic purposes, both in the past and in the present day.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the approach. In it I describe my chosen mode of enquiry, which is the essay, and explain why I think it appropriate and how I have adapted it for this project.

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<sup>25</sup> Thrift, p.139

Chapter 5 contains documentary accounts of, and critical reflection on, each of the nine multi-modal essays that comprise the practice element of my work. This chapter complements and should be read in conjunction with the associated visual outputs.

Chapter 6 reviews and discusses the project as a whole, reflecting on what has been learned and achieved, whether and how the project has met the objectives set at the beginning.

## 2 Attending to place

This project is described as ‘an effort of attention’. The word ‘attention’ derives from the Latin *attendere*, which means to stretch towards. Giving something one’s attention means actively paying heed to it, extending one’s mind, senses and other resources to considering it and perhaps doing something about it. Attention also has connotations of physical engagement and proximity. To attend is to accompany, be present at or part of. And it can have to do with giving or taking care.

The premise of the project is that glass might be a novel resource to facilitate attention to qualities of place. Chapter 3 focuses on glass. I discuss its material, optical and conceptual properties and the wide variety of ways these are exploited, including by artists interested in place. But until then I am leaving glass aside. My present purpose is to think more widely about possible approaches to the challenge I have set myself, through examining and comparing work on place by a range of other people whose practice has nothing to do with glass. Reflecting on what those others have done offers pointers for my own approach, helping to clarify my intentions and objectives and thereby to situate my project within the wider field.

### Establishing a context

In the Introduction I mentioned some ideas from cultural and human geography about how we conceptualise and ‘notice’ place, but the scope and range of interest in relations between place, space, time and human understanding is, of course, a great deal wider than that. Skimming across and dipping into the oceans of fascinating material in philosophy, psychology, urban planning, cultural studies, literature, poetry and film (to name a few of the disciplines involved) is both exhilarating and frightening. The sheer scale of things to get one’s head round and the difficulty and obscurity of some of the ideas feels potentially overwhelming. But darting about I quite soon discovered that much of what is out there seemed definitely not relevant, and this in itself was helpful.

I realised that certain parameters of interest were already set quite tightly in my mind, though I had not explicitly thought them through. Specifically I was curious about:

- Work that attends to the textural character of real, specific, particular places in the world (not to issues of value or meaning and not to abstract or theoretical concepts of place, imaginary places, or features of places as examples of generic categories or types<sup>26</sup>);
- *and* involves efforts of attention that require proximity, using body, brain, ears or eyes to tap directly into the sensory experience of a place (rather than relying on things known, remembered, or imagined about it ‘in the mind’s eye’);
- *and* respects the place as a subject in its own right (rather than as a catalyst for exploration of other personal, historical or cultural issues,<sup>27</sup> a means to explore the unconscious mind<sup>28</sup> or, as Gaston Bachelard observes in his reflections on the significance of ‘the house’, ‘*a tool for analysis* of the human soul’<sup>29</sup>).

The domain of practice that meets all these criteria is a considerably smaller but still richly varied pool. I fished in it opportunistically, scooping out what came my way from every source<sup>30</sup> (and putting some of it straight back). My aim was not to be comprehensive but to find a range of varied practice that would provide good food for thought.

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<sup>26</sup> See for example, Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> As, for example, in Xavier de Maistre’s peroration, *A Journey Round my Room* (London: Alma Classics, 2013), (first published in 1794).

<sup>28</sup> See for example, the significance of place in the work of the Surrealists, as discussed in Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. xxxvii. (italics in the original)

<sup>30</sup> This included revisiting work I already knew about and liked, following up things I came across through other people at the RCA and elsewhere, reading and going to exhibitions that were on at the time, and making discoveries through the unfathomable processes of the internet.

The nine works or bodies of work that I chose to look at closely are listed below:

- 'Journey to the Surface of the Earth'  
Project by the Boyle Family 1968 -  
*Four artists: Mark Boyle 1934-2005, Joan Hills, born 1931, Sebastian Boyle, born 1962, Georgia Boyle, born 1964*
- 'New Topographics - Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape'  
Exhibition in Rochester, New York 1975  
*Ten photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, Art Sinasbaugh, all born 1930's and 1940's*
- 'Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris'  
Text (inventory), written in 1974  
*Georges Perec, writer, 1936-1982*
- Paintings of streetscapes in Coventry  
Works made 1998 -  
*George Shaw, painter, born 1966*
- Paintings of streetscapes in East London  
Works made 2012 -  
*Simon Ling, painter, born 1968*
- Paintings of streetscapes in North London  
Works made 1960s -  
*Frank Auerbach, painter, born 1931*
- 'Central Park in the Dark'  
Piece for chamber orchestra, written in 1906  
*Charles Ives, composer, 1874-1954*
- 'The City and the City'  
Novel, published in 2009  
*China Miéville, writer, born 1972*
- Works made by walking in landscapes  
Works made 1960s -  
*Richard Long, sculptor, born 1945*

This collection feels as though it assembled itself. I was not looking out initially for examples of particular 'types' of work, but rather for anything that caught and held my interest. What I have included here are the pieces that subsequently would not

let go but stayed with me insistently, refusing to be left out. Looking at the list, two things are striking. Firstly, everything (apart from the Ives) comes from the past fifty years. It represents other people's thinking that has paralleled my own in time, and to some extent in place (London, Bristol, Paris...), though I was unaware of most of it before. The second thing that stands out is that almost all of these people are men. I am unclear what to make of this. It resonates with certain conventional assumptions about gendered interests (impersonal, objective, externally directed versus personal, relational, more internally oriented) and how these are manifest in the different focus of women's and men's creative work. But if those hold, and I am not sure they do, then as a woman where do I fit? I decided, for the present, to leave that question aside.<sup>31</sup>

With regard to the content and focus of the work, what all these artists share is a bundle of connected interests in making discoveries: about the character of places, about their own capacities as individuals (and/or ours as human beings), and about the power of particular modes of working. And each makes efforts of attention in which those three components - place, person and mode of working - are tangled up together. But the reasons for their interests vary and each has a different balance of concerns. The media and processes they work with also differ. In the next section I explore and characterise this diversity of motivations and approaches, in order to map for myself a range of possibilities.

### **Forms of diversity**

The American photographer and filmmaker Paul Strand once wrote:

It has always been my belief that the true artist, like the true scientist, is a researcher using materials and techniques to dig into the truth and meaning of the world in which he himself lives; and what he creates, or better perhaps, brings back, are the objective results of his explorations. The

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<sup>31</sup> For my subsequent thoughts about this, see note on p.189

measure of his talent is the richness he finds in such a life's voyage of discovery and the effectiveness with which he is able to embody it through his chosen medium.<sup>32</sup>

The people whose work I have been thinking about could all, I think, identify with Strand's description, but they approach the experience of being-in-the-world from such contrasting points of view - as a problem to tackle (Boyle Family, New Topographics photographers), a conundrum to savour (Perec), a responsibility to honour (Shaw), or an opportunity to make something of (Ling, Auerbach, Ives, Miéville, Long) - that they would perhaps not see themselves as having much in common. They are discussed here in that order.

The Boyle Family's ambition is a simple one, similar to my own and others mentioned in the Introduction and also shared with many other artists. Recognising how perceptions of the world are obstructed and distorted by human self-interest and cultural beliefs, they want to find a way to loosen and challenge those constraints. Their goal is to present the world raw, entirely unmediated by artistic judgment:

[We want] to see if it's possible for us to look at the world or a small part of it, without being reminded consciously or unconsciously of myths and legends, art out of the past – or present, art and myths of other cultures. We also want to be able to look at anything without discovering in it our mother's womb, our lover's thighs, the possibility of a handsome profit or even the makings of an *effective* work of art. We don't want to find in it memories of places where we suffered joy or anguish or tenderness or laughter. We want to see without motive and without reminiscence this cliff, this street, this roof, this field, this rock, this earth.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Strand, 'Letter to the Editor', *Photographic Journal* 103 (1963), 216.

<sup>33</sup> Arts Council of Great Britain, *Beyond Image: Boyle Family*, Hayward Gallery exhibition catalogue. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986), p. 18. (italics in the original)

Diagnosing the problem as one of human subjectivity they do not go for half measures, but attack it with a strategy of uncompromising objectivity. The 'manual' followed in their *Journey to the Surface of the Earth* prescribes a rigid quasi-scientific regime to prevent any taint of personal judgment intruding on the selection and handling of the sites they present.<sup>34</sup> The resin-based relief panels that result from the project are indistinguishable to look at from real fragments of the surface of the earth. (fig. 02)

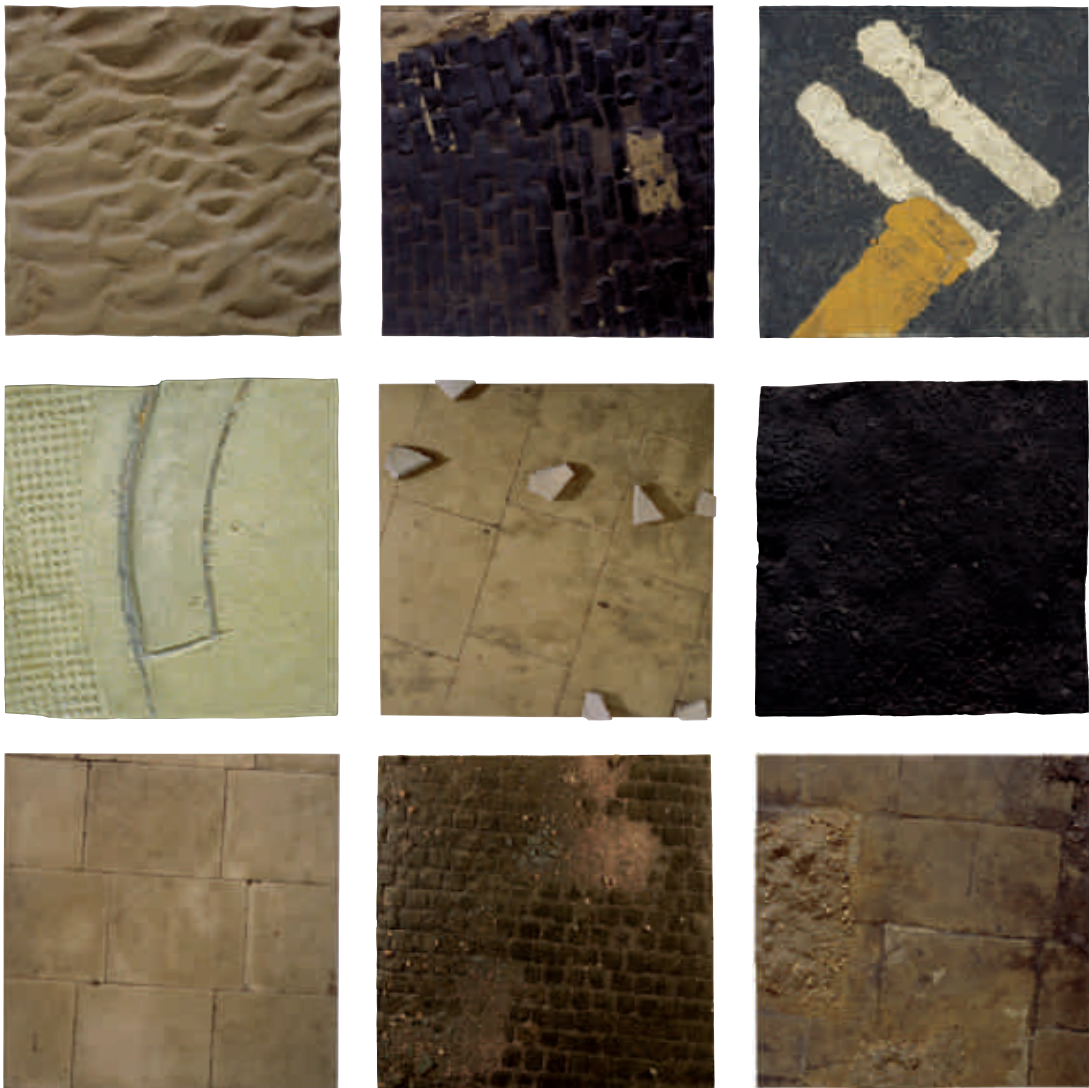


fig. 02. 'Boyle Family Works from the 1960s and 1970s', mixed media, fibreglass, resin<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Mark Boyle, *Journey to the Surface of the Earth: Mark Boyle's Atlas and Manual* (Cologne: Edition Hansjorg Meyer, 1970).

<sup>35</sup> Cover image from exhibition catalogue, 9-31 October 2009, Bourne Fine Art, Edinburgh, Exhibition Catalogue, © Boyle Family.



The *New Topographics* exhibition of photography in Rochester, New York in 1975 also started from a concern that clear sight of places is obstructed by the weight of prior understanding or belief and set out to subvert that. But in contrast to the Boyle Family's generalised objective, the target of this exhibition was highly specific. The show was designed as a corrective and riposte to 'years of either sublime or documentary approaches' to landscape photography, whose careful composition and implied narrative were felt to have so 'stultified' their viewers that they could not recognise the 'familiar, ordinary landscape'.<sup>36</sup> The photos presented in the exhibition were neutral, deadpan images of nondescript suburban places. (fig. 03)

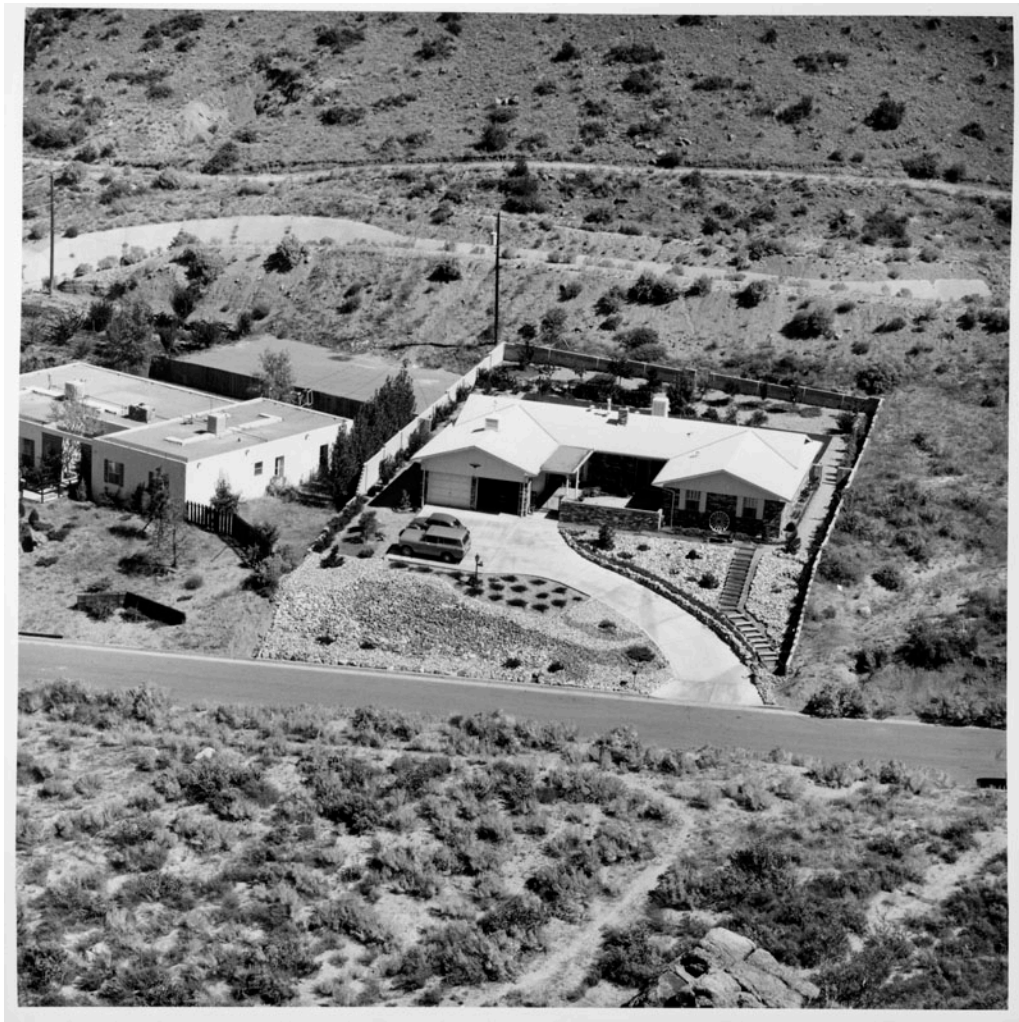


fig. 03. Joe Deal, 'Untitled View (Albuquerque)' 1973, black and white photograph, 32 x 32cm<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Thomas F. Barrow, Shelley Armitage, and William E. Tydeman, eds., *Reading into Photography: Selected Essays 1959-1980* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> <https://thephotobook.wordpress.com/2010/04/11/new-topographics/> [accessed 6 November 2016] © The Estate of Joe Deal, courtesy of George Eastman Museum and Robert Mann Gallery NY

According to the show's curator, they were designed to function 'with a minimum of inflection in the sense that the photographer's influence on the look of the subject is minimal [...] Rather than the picture having been created by the frame, there is a sense of the frame having been laid on an existing scene without interpreting too much'.<sup>38</sup> The aim was 'the making of a photograph which is primarily about that which is in front of the lens', and the intended impact on the viewer was to exchange 'the experience of objects situated in an ideal space' for 'the experience of seeing [the place] in itself'.<sup>39</sup>

The French experimental writer Georges Perec, likewise, was concerned about how to access the immanent character of place. But for him cultural baggage was not the problem. In his three-day attempt to describe the ever-changing happenings in the Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris, all items of conventional note were easily despatched in a preamble. The tantalizing challenge was the ungraspable nature of the rest, 'what goes on when there is nothing going on, and nothing going by except time, people, cars and clouds'.<sup>40</sup>

Perec tried for efficiency's sake to be systematic in his observations but, unlike the Boyle Family, he happily accepted this was not possible. Indeed, he regarded the evidence of his flagging attention as data, interrogating it to understand how, inevitably, his capacity for attention was mediated by language and constrained by his fallible humanity. Perec's ambition was not personal, to discover something for or about himself. In his explorations he adopted what Michael Sheringham describes as 'the anonymous avatar of a self',<sup>41</sup> seeking to grasp the nature of things on behalf of anyone interested. He presents his work as a reflexive account of that process of trying. (fig. 04)

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<sup>38</sup> William Jenkins, 'Introduction to The New Topographics', pp. 51-56 in Barrow et al, (p.53), (originally published 1975).

<sup>39</sup> James Hugunin, 'Joe Deal's Optical Democracy', pp. 201-207 in Barrow et al, (p.202).

<sup>40</sup> Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, trans. by Marc Lowenthal (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Wakefield Press, 2010), p. 12, (originally published 1975).

<sup>41</sup> Sheringham, p. 84.

Some Japanese on a bus  
 The bells of Saint-Sulpice begin to ring (this  
 would be, I believe, a baptism)  
 The birds make a trip round the square  
 The two meter maids from yesterday pass by  
 again; they seem worried today.  
 A bit of liveliness in the café, in the street  
 A man who has just bought a pack of Winstons  
 and a pack of Gitanes tears off the crystal  
 (cellophane) envelope of the pack of Winstons  
 Slight change in the light  
 Some Japanese on a bus; they don't have  
 headphones; the attendant is Japanese  
 All the pigeons settle on the plaza  
 The lights turn red (they do this often)  
 Scouts (same ones) pass the church again  
 An apple-green 2CV with a l'Eure-et-Loire  
 registration number (18)  
 A bus. Japanese.  
 Gathering of some individuals in front of  
 Saint-Sulpice.  
 I can make out a man at the top of the steps,  
 sweeping (Is it the beadle?). I know there is  
 going to be a wedding (from two customers  
 who just, in fact, went over to attend it).  
 A little girl flanked by her parents (or by her  
 kidnappers) is weeping  
 A bus (Globus) three-quarters empty

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A lady who has just bought an ugly  
 candleholder goes by  
 A small bus goes by: Club Reisen Keller  
 Bus, Japanese.  
 I'm cold. I order a brandy  
 A car goes by, its hood covered in dead leaves  
 A motorcyclist goes by, pushing a very new red  
 Yamaha 125  
 For the umpteenth time the 79 rue de Rennes  
 auto-driving school car goes by  
 A little girl with a blue balloon goes by  
 For the second time a meter maid in slacks goes  
 goes by  
 Beginnings of a traffic jam in rue Bonaparte  
 Lots of people, lots of cars  
 A man goes by, eating a cake (the reputation  
 of the neighbourhood confectioners is not to be  
 doubted)  
 A bus: Paris-Sud buses: are they tourists?  
 The bells of Saint-Sulpice begin ringing, maybe  
 for the wedding. The big doors of the church  
 are open.  
 Paris-Vision bus  
 The bridal procession enters the church  
 Traffic jam in rue du Vieux-Colombier  
 The buses are at a virtual standstill on the  
 square  
 Fourth passage of Michael Mohrt's distant  
 double  
 Distant flight of pigeons.

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fig. 04. Georges Perec, 'An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris' 1975, (extract)

These examples just discussed were conceived as methodological projects, experiments in ways of coming closer to the true texture of a place. All three are characterised, to different degrees, by efforts of detachment, standing back. The panels, the exhibition and Perec's book were presented at the time less as individual artworks than as test pieces, evidence of what such methods can achieve.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, in the works discussed next each person's practice is tightly

<sup>42</sup> Although of course they have also been widely critically reviewed on other grounds - the panels admired for their unexpected beauty, the photos excoriated for their perceived banality and the words appreciated as a concrete poem.

intertwined with their personal experience and sense of place. The range described explores the diversity of purposes such work can represent.

George Shaw's paintings of the Tile Hill area of Coventry where he grew up in the 1970s are avowedly nostalgic, concerned with how things once were, both there and in his life. His aims are documentary, drawing attention to the loss of places whose passing would otherwise go unacknowledged: 'Things that I've known since I could see or think or walk just being removed off the face of the earth without anybody saying anything... I mean, why would they say anything, it's just a shitty old pub'.<sup>43</sup> He defines this series of paintings as self-portraiture, not landscape,<sup>44</sup> though the sites he chooses have no explicit significance in his history. They are 'not places where anything really specific happened'. Rather, they represent the context of his living: 'Like a little brick wall or a little patch of grass. It's just something which was always witness to me kind of walking past it'.<sup>45</sup> (fig. 05)

Shaw describes himself as 'a prowler with a camera. I have my territory that I revisit looking for clues to I'm not sure what. I might pass a certain place a hundred times and then, one day, something about it catches my eye. I take a few photographs [...] and toss them aside [...] until I find one particular image is nagging away at me [...] it is that something that I am chasing after when I eventually make a painting'.<sup>46</sup> Shaw's approach overall is of a piece. He takes a long view back in time, selects his sites in a leisurely manner and the painting process is slow. He hopes that 'over that long period of time making [...] some of that concentration, some of that time spent gets soaked up. I hope that other people would share that sensation'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Jared Schiller, 'Artist George Shaw - Interview at Baltic Gateshead', video, uploaded 10 March 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfiGKaoRGS4>> [accessed 24 October 2016]

<sup>44</sup> Fisun Guner, 'A Q&A with George Shaw, Painter', a-n, The Artists Information Company, 9 May 2016, <<https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/a-qa-with-george-shaw-painter>> [accessed 16 October 2016]

<sup>45</sup> George Shaw, *What I Did This Summer*, Artist Talk at Dundee Contemporary Arts on 27 January 2011, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMHYHwN\\_LgE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMHYHwN_LgE)> [accessed 26 September 2016]

<sup>46</sup> Sean O'Hagan, 'George Shaw: "Sometimes I look at my work and its conservatism shocks me"', *The Observer*, 13 October 2011, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/feb/13/george-shaw-tile-hill-baltic-interview>> [accessed 21 November 2016]

<sup>47</sup> Schiller interview.



fig. 05. George Shaw, 'Scenes from the Passion: Late' 2002, enamel paint on board, 917 x 1215mm, Tate Collection <sup>48</sup>

For Shaw, the specifics of the place are more important than the paint.<sup>49</sup> For the next two painters the balance tilts the other way. For Simon Ling, choice of site appears to be unimportant. What matters for him is how the visibility and status of a place is transformed through the act of paying it attention. For example, his *Untitled 2012* (fig. 06) shows 'a hotchpotch drag of shops on Hackney Road; elements constructed years apart that jut into each other'.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Source of image: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/shaw-scenes-from-the-passion-late-t07945>> [accessed 6 November 2016] © George Shaw

<sup>49</sup> Shaw works, unusually, with Humbrol enamels, but says this was originally a chance decision.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Wroe and Simon Grant, 'Why painting still matters', interview with Simon Ling, *The Guardian*, 8 November 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/nov/08/why-painting-still-matters-tate-britain>> [accessed 21 November 2016]



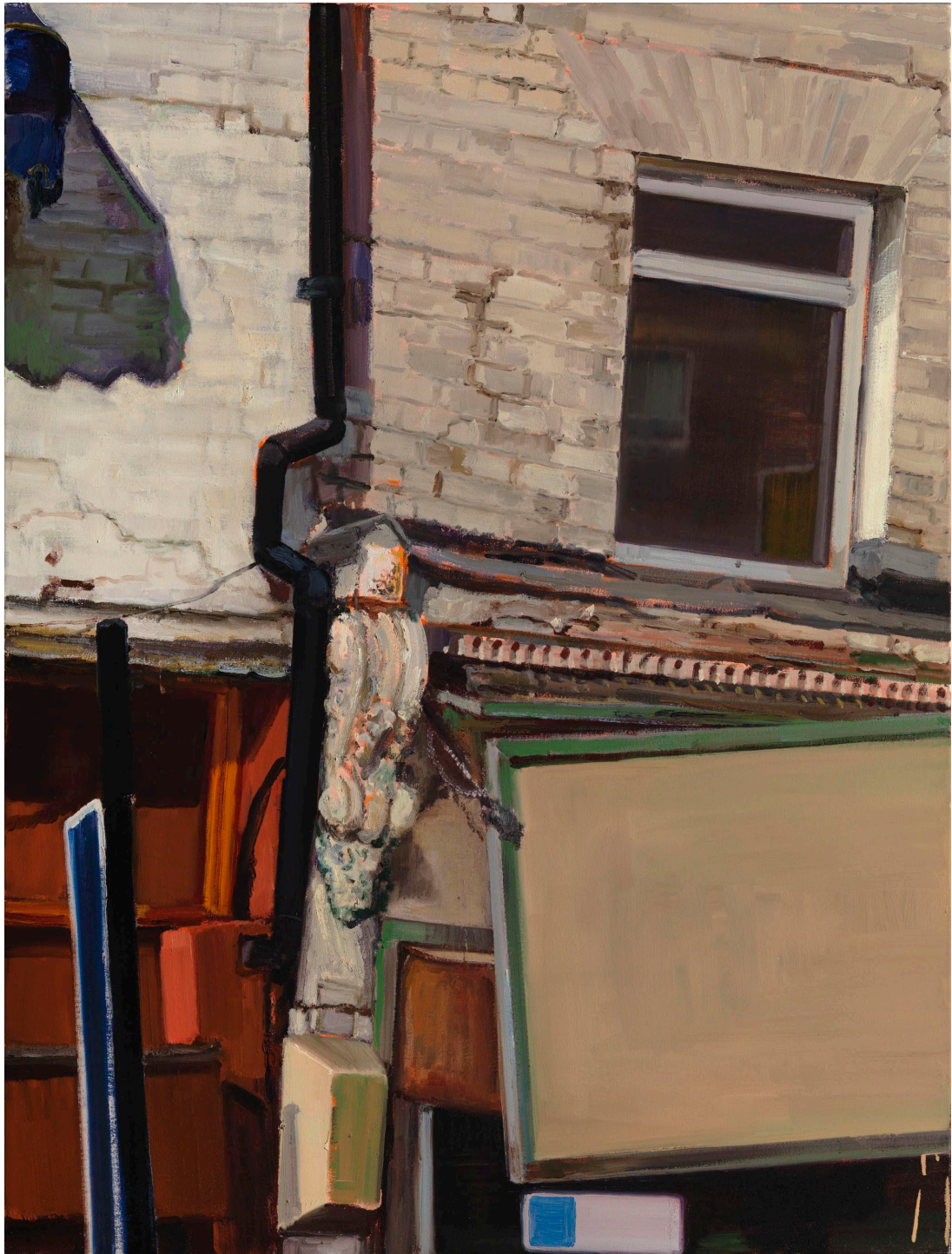


fig. 06. Simon Ling, 'Untitled 2012', oil on canvas, 1205 × 905mm <sup>51</sup>

This painting, Ling says, is 'of a real place, but it is not to do with documenting or cataloguing it; it is less a celebration of the ordinary than a demonstration of the idea that by painting something that is apparently nothing, it has the opportunity to

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<sup>51</sup> Source of image: <<http://www.greengrassi.com/Artists?aid=15&eid=126>> [accessed 06 November 2016] Photo credit: © Marcus Leith. Courtesy greengrassi, London.

become everything.' Ling is interested in the present moment, 'something that is evasive and slips away if you try to grab it'. He paints directly in the street 'because the texture of decision-making is different. It feels sharper and healthier and quicker'. His own presence in the painting is immediate not historical: 'I want to make this a live, but slightly shifted, version of the world that has me both in it and looking at it.' For him too, the paint helps, but for contrasting reasons to Shaw: 'The great thing about paint is that it still retains a sense of its temporality. So you make a fluid mark, which then becomes solid. But the sense of it once being fluid is still there. That gesture you made to place that mark is held, as is the observation and the thought that prompted it.'

Frank Auerbach's goal is more elusive still, to capture or even create through paint some novel truth about a place he already knows extremely well. Over decades he has repeatedly painted certain places near his home in Camden Town. (fig. 07) He seeks to, 'catch hold of the world of fact and experience at some point at which it hasn't been caught before, so that one remakes it in a sense which speaks to oneself directly'.<sup>52</sup> Painting, scraping off and re-painting interminably, he 'goes on and struggles' until he 'reaches the point, hopefully, when the thing seems to stand up for itself and you can't do anything with it, it looks like somebody else's painting'.<sup>53</sup> 'What I am trying to make', he says, 'is a stonking, independent, coherent image that has never been seen before [...] that stalks into the world like a new monster'.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> John Christopher Battye, 'Frank Auerbach talks to John Christopher Battye', *Art & Artists*, (January, 1971) 55.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Smith, 'When Stephen Smith met Artist Frank Auerbach', BBC Newsnight interview on Tate Gallery website <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/frank-auerbach/auerbach-introduction>> [accessed 18 October 2016]

<sup>54</sup> Quoted on Tate Gallery website, *ibid.*



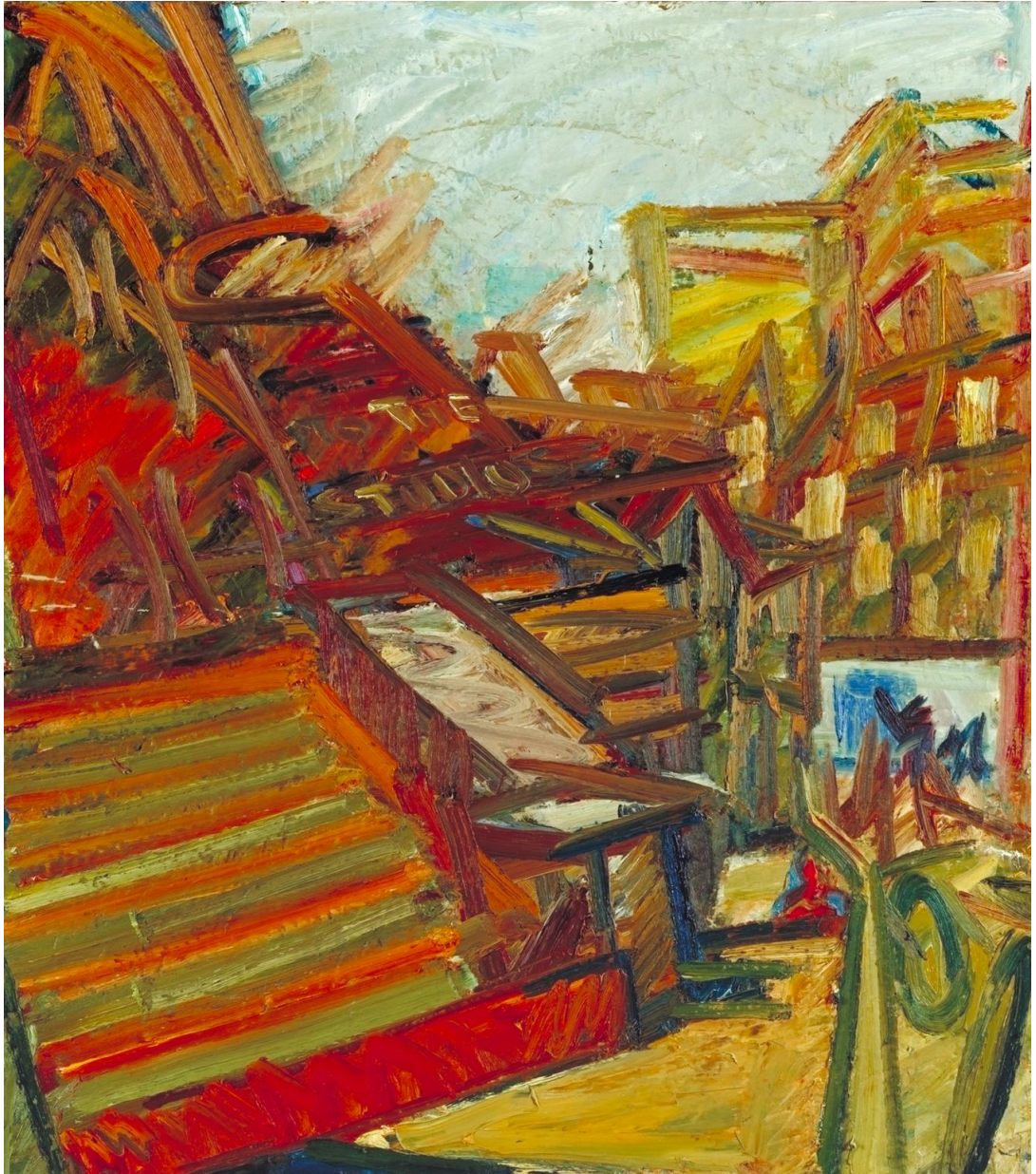


fig. 07. Frank Auerbach, 'To the Studios' 1990-91, oil on canvas, 1695 x 1494mm, Tate Collection<sup>55</sup>

Shaw's paintings are ultra realistic, appearing practically like photos. Ling's are more evidently painted, but the subject matter is clearly recognisable. Both it seems are interested in using their materials to reflect or make transparent something about *what's there* in the places that they paint. Auerbach's work is quite unlike that, his

<sup>55</sup> Source of image: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/auerbach-to-the-studios-t06635> © Frank Auerbach, courtesy Marlborough Fine Art



paint is famously thick<sup>56</sup> and his imagery opaque. His subject, according to the critic TJ Clark, is ‘the feeling of seeing’, and lack of clarity is part of that:

Impasto in Auerbach is [...] a way of *not* seeing, or not seeing clearly, or not straight away; of not being sure what one does see until, seemingly uncontrollably, the flurry of strokes divulges the appearance on the other side of the handiwork. Impasto is what gets in the way of seeing, and therefore the process by means of which seeing is retrieved.<sup>57</sup>

The American composer Charles Ives sought something similar to Auerbach but in a different medium; he drew attention to the experience of hearing by making the process of listening difficult. In his 1906 composition *Central Park in the Dark*,<sup>58</sup> Ives drew on subject matter and material that would have been familiar to his audience. (fig. 08) He further signalled its ordinariness by offering two alternative titles - *A Contemplation of Nothing Serious* and *In the Good Old Summer Time*.

This piece purports to be a picture-in-sounds of the sounds of nature and of happenings that men would hear some thirty or so years ago (before the combustion engine and radio monopolized the earth and air), when sitting in a bench in Central Park on a hot summer night. [...] The strings represent the night sounds and silent darkness – interrupted by sounds from the Casino over the pond – of street singers coming up from the Circle singing, in sports, the tunes of those days – of some ‘night owls’ from Healy’s whistling the latest of the Freshman March – the “occasional elevated”, a street parade, or a “break-down” in the distance – of newsboys crying “uxtries” – of pianolas having a ragtime war in the apartment house “over the garden wall”, a street car and a street band join in the chorus – a fire engine, a cab horse runs away, lands “over the fence and out,” the wayfarers shout – again the darkness is heard – an echo over the pond – and we walk home.

fig. 08. Note written by Ives about ‘Central Park in the Dark’ in 1914<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> In the interview with Smith he claims that the original reason for this was that the paint simply got thick as he added more layers to try and get it right, and he lacked the courage to scrape it off.

<sup>57</sup> T.J. Clark, ‘Frank Auerbach’s London’, *London Review of Books*, 37: 17 (10 September 2015), 8-10, (p. 9).

<sup>58</sup> A recording by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Leonard Bernstein is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34AqNvhBfVQ> [accessed 6 November 2016]

<sup>59</sup> Charles E. Ives, ‘Note’, in *Central Park in the Dark*, ed. by Jacques-Louis Monod (Hillsdale, New York: Boelke-Bomart, 1973), p. 31.

**Central Park in the Dark** 3

(1906)

Edited by Jacques-Louis Monod

Charles E. Ives  
(1874 - 1954)

**Molto Adagio** [5]

**Molto Adagio** [5]

Violin I *div.* *fff*

Violin II *div.* *fff*

Viola *div.* *fff*

Cello *div.* *fff*

Bass *fff*

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fig. 09. Charles Ives, 'Central Park in the Dark' 1906, composition for chamber orchestra, 7' 16"

But the piece itself (fig. 09) was radical in form and content, creating a spatial atmosphere and soundscape through unprecedented use of polytonality and polyrhythm. Ives apparently 'took as a compliment criticism that [his work was] too dense and crammed with overlapping fragments of ideas thrown together in a

seemingly chaotic stream-of-consciousness'.<sup>60</sup> His view was that breaking with musical convention was essential to allow 'the ears of a listener to be freed up from the constant expectation of the next predicted event - the problem of [...] "thinking about [rather] than thinking in music"'.<sup>61</sup>

Where Auerbach uses impasto and Ives exploits abstraction, the fantasy writer China Miéville explores a third mode, metaphor, to address together both the nature of places and of our attention to them. His novel *The City and the City*<sup>62</sup> is written as a thriller, but its central subject is the peculiar everyday experience of his own city, London, where everyone lives cheek by jowl with strangers inhabiting their separate lives. The book is set in a fictional place where two unfriendly cities and their inhabitants belong in separate jurisdictions that literally co-exist in the same physical space. The official government strategy for handling this awkward 'geotopical crosshatching' in Miéville's imaginary world is a rigorously enforced policy where the occupants of each city are required to internalize the habit of 'unseeing' everything about the other. In the novel the peculiarly constrained environment is only loosely specified, casually referred to without explanation and left deliberately ambiguous so that it cannot be accurately envisaged. Its bizarre effects on perception and behaviour are noted in passing, but taken for granted as part of the hinterland to the main narrative. Miéville's work is subtler than the others discussed above; he reflects on attention indirectly, through a mirror, only half noticing what we only half notice, and making that itself seem ordinary. (fig. 10)

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Guttman, 'Charles Ives Fourth Symphony', 2011, <[www.classicalnotes.net/classics4/ives4.html](http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics4/ives4.html)> [accessed 30 October 2016]

<sup>61</sup> Cameron O'Connor, *Transcendentalism in Charles Ives Central Park in the Dark*, 2016, <<http://www.cameronoconnor.com/etc/transcendentalism-in-charles-ives-central-park-in-the-dark-2013>> [accessed 24 October 2016]

<sup>62</sup> China Miéville, *The City and the City* (London: Pan Books, 2011).

“...After a two-week or however-long-it-was course, no one thought visitors would have metabolised the deep prediscursive instinct for our borders that Besz and Ul Qomans have, to have picked up the real rudiments of unseeing. But we did insist that they acted as if they had. We, and the authorities of Ul Qoma, expected strict overt decorum, interacting with, and indeed obviously noticing, our crosshatched neighbouring city-state not at all...” p.93

“...Most vermin are interstitial. It is very hard to prove that the shy cold-weather lizards in cracks in Besz walls can live in Beszel only, as frequently claimed. Certainly they die if exported into Ul Qoma (even more gently than by children’s hands), but they tend to do so in Besz captivity as well. Pigeons, mice, wolves, bats live in both cities, are crosshatched animals. But by unspoken tradition, the majority of the local wolves – mean, bony things long-since adapted to urban scavenging – are generally if nebulously considered Besz: it is only those few of respectable size and none-too-vile pelt, the same notion held, that are Ul Qoman. Many citizens of Beszel avoid transgressing this – entirely unnecessary and invented – categorical boundary by never referring to wolves...” p.112

“...I found fracturedcity.org, the main discussion site for the kooks of dopplurbanology, Ul-Qoma-and-Beszél obsession (the site’s approach of conjoining the two as a single object of study would outrage polite opinion in both cities, but judging by comments on the forum it was commonly if mildly illegally accessed from both, too). From there a series of links (cheekily, confident in the indulgence or incompetence of our and the Ul Qoman censors, many were servers with .up and .zb addresses) gave me a few paragraphs copied from *Between the City and the City*...” p.113

“...I took an unmarked squad car from the pool, but ran it with the sirens making their hysteric *gulp gulp* noises, so I could ignore traffic laws. (It was only the Besz rules which applied to me and which therefore I was with authority ignoring, but traffic law is one of the compromise areas where the Oversight Committee ensures close similarity between the rules of Beszel and Ul Qoma. Though the traffic cultures are not identical, for the sake of the pedestrians and cars who have, unseeing, to negotiate much foreign traffic, our vehicles and theirs run at comparable speeds in comparable ways. We all learn to tactfully avoid our neighbour’s emergency vehicles, as well as our own.)” p.114

fig. 10. China Miéville, *The City and The City* 2011 (extracts)

Everyone discussed so far makes work *about* places. The last person in my group, the sculptor Richard Long, has a different approach, one that is more immediate and physically engaged. His walks and other interventions *in* and *on* a place touch and alter it directly, while at the same time the place shapes his work. And yet, despite this intimacy, his concern for place is more instrumental than the others. Over more than 40 years he has established a consistent repertoire of lines and geometric forms, and each of his walks and sculptures involves a version of one of those forms. (fig. 11) He seems, perhaps, less interested in places for themselves than in how their particularities influence his work:

I bring the intellectual baggage of an artist from the Western world to a place in the middle of Mongolia, for example. But then, when I'm in that place, I use the materials of the place. Every work in the landscape is absolutely a meeting place of who I am and the topography, characteristics, and beauty of the place. Every place in the world is different, so even though I might be repeating circles, every circle is different.<sup>63</sup>



fig. 11. Richard Long, 'Walking A Line in Peru' 1972<sup>64</sup>

A further aspect of Long's difference is his choice of subject matter. All the others concern themselves, in one way or another, with what the *New Topographics* exhibition described as 'man-altered landscapes'. Although it is a clumsy term, this nicely encompasses the concept of a place as a site of hybrid interaction. Long,

<sup>63</sup> Ina Cole, 'Conversation with Richard Long', *Sculpture Magazine*, July/August 2016, <[www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag16/julyaug\\_16/fullfeature.shtml](http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag16/julyaug_16/fullfeature.shtml)> [accessed 19 September 2016]

<sup>64</sup> Source of image: <[https://lisson.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/attachment/image/body/5166/WALKING\\_A\\_LINE\\_IN\\_PERU\\_1972.jpg](https://lisson.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/attachment/image/body/5166/WALKING_A_LINE_IN_PERU_1972.jpg)> [accessed 06 November 2016] © Richard Long

however, deliberately seeks out wilderness, sites that appear to have no such identity until he alters them himself by arranging stones, cutting daisies or trampling grass. While the others grapple variously with the character of something that is already ongoing, Long focuses his attention on the prior moment at which a place first comes into being.

### **Commonalities**

Despite the variety that is manifest in this range of work, there are also notable similarities, certain features of tone and approach whose recurring presence perhaps suggests that they 'come with the territory' of trying to pay attention to place, irrespective of the reasons why one might choose to do that. In this section I reflect on some of those commonalities in relation to overall attitudes and tactics, choices of subject matter and presentation of material. I then briefly consider the question of how audiences respond.

#### *Attitudes to the challenge*

Everyone involved would seem likely to acknowledge that paying attention to the character of place - doing what François Bon calls the 'work of looking'<sup>65</sup> - is a Sisyphean task, one that can never be completed because there is no fixed or single truth to reach at the end of it. And they would probably see that as a key reason why the challenge is so interesting. The determination to 'constantly and hopelessly' keep going despite this awareness, as the Boyle Family saw themselves bound to do, requires what Auerbach identifies in himself as a 'doggedness' of spirit<sup>66</sup>, and which it seems to me they all share. This is manifest in the willingness to prowl around, hang out in and/or roam across the chosen territory for hours,

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<sup>65</sup> François Bon, a French writer, took the same train from Paris-Est to Nancy every week for five months in 1998. He used the speed of travel and rhythms of attention induced by the repeated journey as deliberate constraints on what could be seen, to shape and explore 'the work of looking' at the passing view. François Bon, *Paysage fer* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1999) (back cover)

<sup>66</sup> Tim Adams, 'Frank Auerbach: Constable, Turner and me', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/sep/21/frank-auerbach-constable-turner-and-me-interview>> [accessed 21 November 2016]

days or years, constantly revisiting and repeatedly restarting from a slightly different angle, in slightly changed conditions on a different day. It is also evident in the form of the results - uncompleted projects, unfinished series and open-ended groups of work - none of which seek final resolution in a single, finished piece.

### *Forms of attention*

When George Shaw and Charles Ives embarked on the works discussed above, it seems they already knew in principle what it was about their chosen places that they wanted to convey. But for others who start with a more open view, discovering that is a key part of the challenge. The range of approaches adopted to evade or see beyond the dominant narratives of place is as varied as the reasons for trying to do so. Some, like the Boyle Family, alter the terms of their encounters with the world by *making* rules; others do so by *breaking* them, adopting an unusual mode of or rationale for being in a place that clashes with conventional expectations. Some try, literally, to alter the perspective: physically stepping back to the point where details are subsumed within wider patterns and rhythms;<sup>67</sup> deliberately de-focusing their gaze and conceptually suspending judgment to achieve a state of 'evenly suspended attention' whereby everything in view is valued equally;<sup>68</sup> or simply keeping on looking, as Auerbach does, until what is seen becomes unrecognisable. But whatever strategy is chosen to achieve the desired estrangement, it seems to be implicitly agreed that the process of attention involves a dual effort, one that is

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<sup>67</sup> This was the view of Henri LeFebvre, who originated the concept of rhythmanalysis as a way of understanding urban spaces: 'In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely [...]. A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function. However, to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been *grasped* by it; one must *let oneself go*, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration [...]. It is therefore necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside. A balcony does the job admirably.' Henri LeFebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004), p.27. (italics in the original)

<sup>68</sup> As Marion Milner, mentioned earlier, tried to do. A 'self-conscious strategy of 'not directing one's notice to anything in particular and maintaining the same evenly suspended attention [...] in the face of all one hears,' was the psychoanalytic technique recommended by Sigmund Freud in 1912 to facilitate an unscripted and unpredictable interaction with the analysand. Freud quoted in Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, (MIT Press: Cambridge and London, 1999), p. 367.

inwardly as well as outwardly directed. People work on themselves, knowingly, using their self-awareness to refresh their awareness of place.

### *Locations*

The places examined in these works are ordinary and unspectacular, without obvious qualities of conventional beauty or powerful, established narratives. They are certainly not, as George Shaw observes, 'the places you'd see on a National Heritage tour'.<sup>69</sup> Many, indeed, are almost not 'places' at all, but rather the type of non-specific transitional spaces mentioned in the Introduction that we tend to encounter in anonymous mode, while in 'thin roles' as passengers or customers.<sup>70</sup> And, interestingly, although much of the character of such places is generated by the criss-crossing actions and passage of people, the locations are frequently presented in the works I have been examining as 'curiously unoccupied',<sup>71</sup> caught at a moment when nobody happens to be there. In Shaw's case, again, this is deliberate: 'I don't want people to be wondering, like in a Lowry [...] what's that person doing, what are those boys doing [...] I'm interested in creating something much more open-ended, more atmospheric'.<sup>72</sup> Whatever other reasons there may be for selecting and presenting places in this way, one would certainly seem to be that textural character is more easily accessed where potentially competing or distracting sources of interest are either absent entirely or out of sight.

### *Angles of interest*

I chose these artists' work for their privileging of texture over meaning and, additionally, because their take on texture is, like my own, more 'musical' than 'painterly' (even though several of them are painters). Their interest is in 'the

<sup>69</sup> Schiller interview.

<sup>70</sup> David Kolb draws a contrast with 'thick' places, 'that engage more and richer aspects of our being'. David Kolb, *Sprawling Places* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008), p. 72.

<sup>71</sup> Catriona Black, 'Review of George Shaw: What I Did This Summer', Exhibition at Dundee Contemporary Arts, *Sunday Herald*, 15 February 2004, <<http://www.artandphilosophy.com/040215.html>> [accessed 18 September 2016]

<sup>72</sup> Private Passions, 'George Shaw in conversation with Michael Berkeley', BBC Radio 3, 18 September 2016, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07vwg51>> [accessed 21 November 2016]



practicing or becoming of place', not in 'place as a noun – a thing, a finished entity – [but] place as a verb'.<sup>73</sup> And all appear to appreciate the chanciness inherent in that practicing, what Doreen Massey calls the 'throwntogetherness'<sup>74</sup> of how place happens and TJ Clark its 'scrawled contingency'.<sup>75</sup> These works are framed to draw attention away from the particular form and contents of a place, even where those are clearly shown. They are presented as indicative samples or examples, not complete accounts. The point is not in the specific details of a particular moment, but in what those suggest about the way things happen overall. Robert Adams, one of the *New Topographics* photographers, explains this memorably:

By Interstate 70: a dog skeleton, a vacuum cleaner, TV dinners, a doll, a pie, rolls of carpet...Later, next to the South Platte River: algae, broken concrete, jet contrails, the smell of crude oil...What I hope to document, though not at the expense of surface detail, is the Form [sic] that underlies this apparent chaos.<sup>76</sup>

### *Handling the material*

Adams speaks of documenting, and that motivation is another common thread that runs through all this work. It manifests as a lightness of touch, a commitment to working with what is there, interfering no more than necessary to enable the place to present itself. This is most obvious in the Boyle Family's work, (despite the fact that their methods of working are anything but light touch). But it is true even of Auerbach and Ives, who transpose their subject matter into almost abstract mode. And the way in which it's true is that while each work carries and embodies powerful traces of its maker's process of attention, opinions about their subject matter are withheld. We are not required to see what they think, but encouraged by their example to look for ourselves. And this can be surprisingly effective. As Michael Sheringham observes about Perec's 'attempt', 'one of the most striking

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Merriman, *Mobility, Space and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 58.

<sup>74</sup> Massey, 2005, p. 140.

<sup>75</sup> Clark, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Barrow et al, p. 55.

features [...] is that to read this experiment in forms of attention is to reduplicate something of the experience itself [...] to 'take in' what we read here, we have to attune ourselves to the rhythm of things, to the way sameness is actually ever-changing, and we ourselves are part of this constant process'.<sup>77</sup>

### *Audiences*

Engaging other people's attention may not be a priority. The Boyle Family state explicitly that: 'All we are trying to do is to teach ourselves to see. We have not been interested in communicating anything to anyone'.<sup>78</sup> They do, nevertheless, present their work to the public, as do the rest. However, as I myself discovered long ago, insights about place are not so easily shared. If you present ordinary places looking much as usual, your work risks being overlooked. For example, the critic Catriona Black comments about Shaw's images that they are 'so like every other unremarkable suburb I've ever seen or lived in that I have to fight the instinct to walk right past them'.<sup>79</sup> And if you present ordinary places looking unrecognisable, your work may equally be dismissed. TJ Clarke himself initially regarded Auerbach's *Primrose Hill, Autumn Morning* as a 'crazy, inconsequential daub'<sup>80</sup> (before concluding some weeks later that it was 'bloody marvellous'). The *New Topographics* exhibition is recalled as having been 'a vigorously hated show', its photos regarded as provocatively and inaccessibly banal. One viewer, however, unexpectedly spotted his own truck in one of the pictures and so kept looking and apparently changed his mind: 'At first they're really stark nothing, but then you really look at them and it's just the way things are. This is interesting, it really is'.<sup>81</sup> It's ironic, but telling, that the hook for this man's attention was personal meaning, which was precisely *not* the point of the show.

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<sup>77</sup> Sheringham, p. 266.

<sup>78</sup> Arts Council of Great Britain, p. 53.

<sup>79</sup> Black.

<sup>80</sup> Clarke, p. 8.

<sup>81</sup> Sean O'Hagan, 'New Topographics: Photographs That Find Beauty in the Banal', *The Guardian*, 8 February 2010, <[www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/feb/08/new-topographics-photographs-american-landscapes](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/feb/08/new-topographics-photographs-american-landscapes)> [accessed 21 November 2016]

### Insights for the present project

I was drawn to the artists examined in this chapter through a sense of temperamental sympathy with their objectives. Their intense and sustained attempts to appreciate the world just as it is, without seeking either to judge or change it, might be regarded by some people as misplaced effort, insufficiently ambitious. The works examined here confirm the complexity of the challenge, whilst also demonstrating why the endeavour is worthwhile. Seeing them reinforces my confidence in the legitimacy of this project and encourages my curiosity about what it will produce.

I identify with some of these artists closely. In George Shaw's approach for example - low key, thorough and conscientious - I recognise my own defaults and that gives additional validation. But encountering familiar qualities in someone else's practice can also be unnerving, insofar as it highlights limitations. Shaw's meticulous realism bothers him for being so conservative;<sup>82</sup> I have similar concerns about my earlier paintings. Auerbach and Miéville are more intriguing because their work is so much bolder than anything I have dared to do. Rather than reassurance they provide challenge by opening up the possibility of a wider, more imaginative palette. They show how subtle truths about places can be presented with great delicacy in forms that are flamboyant, preposterous and grand. Their example bolsters my ambition not to be too cautious in this project and gives me licence to take risks.

At the start of this chapter I wrote that none of these artists have anything to do with glass, and it is true they do not use silica. But in the wider conceptual sense there are, of course, connections, since all the works examined are concerned with cultural and perceptual filters and how they affect our capacity to see. For those like the Boyle Family and the *New Topographics* photographers who seek an unimpeded view, the filters themselves hold no interest; rather they are obstacles

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<sup>82</sup> George Shaw, quoted in Sean O'Hagan interview: 'Sometimes when I have finished a series of paintings, I look at the work and its innate conservatism shocks me. When I was growing up, I thought I was going to be a really contemporary artist doing video and installation work, capturing the zeitgeist and all that, but then I realised I was just lying to myself.'

to be dissolved. Striving for clarity and privileging transparency tend to be key drivers for me too, being manifest both in my previous academic work (where I always tried to write as lucidly as possible) and in my wish to blow the thinnest possible glass. However, in the present case that desire will not suffice, since textures of place are not objects in waiting, susceptible to being revealed by paring away the veils. Another lesson I learned from Auerbach, and from Ives' music too, is that fragmentary, ephemeral and elusive phenomena require a more oblique approach, one that occludes or is even frankly opaque.

I realised that in relation to the project I had thus far been treating glass as a disembodied substance, not merely transparent, but without weight or smell or taste, as if newly minted with no prehistory. But of course glass is not neutral. Like other established modes of practice represented in this chapter - landscape photography, oil painting and musical composition - it comes with a whole hinterland of cultural references. Among these there might be associations I could turn to my advantage; others that I would need to parry or downplay. For some reason neither possibility had occurred to me before, but I now saw that such associations could not be ignored. Observing how the various media chosen by these artists have influenced and shaped their work in practical terms prompted me also to think about all the material aspects of working with glass. Up until this point, again surprisingly, I had not considered how these might impact upon the project. Both these oversights are addressed in Chapter 3, which looks at all aspects of using glass, from earlier times to the present day, including my own experience of it.

The general tenor of the insights just discussed is that my preliminary intentions were too narrowly conceived and needed to expand. But in one way my perspective is already broader than those of these other artists, for their perceptions of the world are inflected through the prism of professional knowledge and experience that comes with being an established practitioner - whether painter, composer, photographer or writer. My professional identity is less securely anchored. Being an erstwhile painter, writer, researcher and social scientist as well as a novice glassmaker, my overall status is uncertain, and this offers a freedom in relation to

my subject that I intend to make the most of. Choosing to undertake a doctoral thesis could, in the circumstances, seem perverse. It requires me to account for, evaluate and justify my actions in ways the other artists do not have to face. But I hope that responsibility will be helpful, challenging and enabling me to present my work in a new and different way. My intentions for doing this through adapting the essay form are the focus of Chapter 4.

### 3 Using glass

The purpose of this chapter is to situate my use of glass in the present project in the context of its wider applications, general and artistic, historical and contemporary. I start by discussing the origins, structure and substance of glass and its characteristic properties before going on to briefly describe the history of its various uses and applications and the ways that public perceptions of glass have altered over time. I then look more specifically at the use of glass by artists and makers and how the field of glass practice has evolved from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. The final section focuses on possible ways of working with glass in the context of the objectives of this project. In it I review the development of my own outlook on glass and then explore examples of work by several other artists where ‘glass’ has been linked to ‘place’ in diverse ways and consider how their various approaches have relevance for my ideas. The chapter ends by suggesting how the experience of working with glass may also provide a fitting metaphor for the overall process of my project.

#### What is glass

The main ingredient of glass is silica. Glass is formed when sand or rock with high silica content is heated to a molten state and then rapidly cooled. In nature this can happen through events such as volcanic eruptions, meteor impacts and lightning strikes. Glass is also made in furnaces. Either way, the critical factor is that in the cooling process the atoms become locked in a disordered state like a liquid before they can form into the regular arrangements characteristic of a solid. Quite why or how this happens has been described as ‘the deepest and most interesting unsolved problem in solid state theory’, and the nature of the ‘glass transition’ remains the subject of vehement debate.<sup>83</sup> The substance that results has an ambiguous structure that has similarly so far defied all attempts at conventional categorization:

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<sup>83</sup> Kenneth Chang, ‘The Nature of Glass Remains Anything but Clear’, *New York Times*, 29 July 2008. p. F1. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/29/science/29glass.html>> [accessed 20 November 2016]

‘Neither liquid nor solid, but sharing qualities of both, glass is its own state of matter’.<sup>84</sup>

At the molecular level, glass is amorphous; it is topologically disordered and lacks any long-range crystalline periodicity. This structural formlessness seems echoed in the unlimited variety of shapes that glass, while molten, can be encouraged to assume and in the apparently contradictory nature of its various characteristics as a physical material. Glass is strong, hard, rigid and elastic; it is also fragile, brittle and easily shattered. In many respects it is unresponsive, being biologically inactive, chemically inert and resistant to chemical corrosion and electrical current. In other ways it is quite open, absorbing and holding heat, transmitting, reflecting, bending, splitting and concentrating light. A key feature of glass is its transparency, but it can also be translucent or opaque.

### **Glass in use**

Glass has been used for many centuries across the world to make containers, mirrors, beads and other decorative objects. In Europe in the early modern period the development of optical tools and instruments incorporating glass lenses and convex and concave mirrors transformed the scope of scientific investigation and knowledge by making things visible that were too small or far away to be seen with the human eye. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the industrialization of glass manufacturing brought about what Isobel Armstrong has termed ‘the era of public glass’, when ‘an environment of mass transparency, never before experienced, came rapidly into being’.<sup>85</sup> Through a combination of new methods of working, falling prices and a huge increase in production, mass-produced glass products ranging from bottles to toys became widely available and cheap to buy, while plate glass windows and other innovations in building with glass completely changed both the look and experience of Western cities. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, glass had become such a

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<sup>84</sup> Corning Museum of Glass, ‘What is Glass’, <<http://www.cmog.org/article/what-is-glass>> [accessed 24 January 2016]

<sup>85</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 1.

significant feature of the built environment that the German architect Paul Scheerbart announced the arrival of a 'culture of glass'.<sup>86</sup> In the present day, glass continues to serve all its traditional functions but has also acquired a range of new ones. The European Alliance of Glass Industries (EAGI) provides the following list of products<sup>87</sup> in which glass is currently used:

- Packaging (jars for food, bottles for drinks, flacons for cosmetics and pharmaceuticals)
- Tableware (drinking glasses, plates, cups, bowls)
- Housing and buildings (windows, facades, insulation, reinforcement structures)
- Interior design and furniture (mirrors, partitions, balustrades, tables, shelves, lighting)
- Appliances and electronics (oven doors, hobs, TVs, computer screens, smart-phones)
- Transport (windcreens, backlights, structural components of cars, aircrafts, ships)
- Medical technology, biotechnology, life science engineering, optical glass
- Radiation protection from X-Rays (radiology) and gamma-rays (nuclear)
- Fibre optic cables (phones, TV, computer: to carry information)
- Renewable energy (solar-energy glass, wind turbines)

In the early years of its mass use, people were fascinated by glass in all respects: the heroics and spectacle of its making, as viewed and reported in the press by glass factory 'tourists' (including Charles Dickens); its sparkling brilliance, as witnessed by the crowds that visited the Crystal Palace in the London Great Exhibition of 1851; and its magical effects, as exemplified in the kaleidoscope, after whose first demonstration in 1819 more than two hundred thousand were reportedly sold.<sup>88</sup>

Since then, things have changed. The novelty has worn off and the extraordinary qualities of glass are largely taken for granted. We no longer actively celebrate the fact that glass can help us see better, but focus instead on the subjects it enables us to view. While ever more remarkable applications of glass continue to be developed, we enjoy the benefits without necessarily appreciating or even realizing the role glass plays in bringing them about. At a conceptual level the same holds true. Over the past few hundred years a plethora of glass-related words - lens,

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<sup>86</sup> Paul Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1972).

<sup>87</sup> Glass Alliance Europe, 'Applications' <[www.glassallianceeurope.eu/en/applications](http://www.glassallianceeurope.eu/en/applications)> [accessed 19 January 2016]

<sup>88</sup> Armstrong, p. 255.



mirror, reflection, focus, transparency, blur - have slid into our language as metaphors for thinking and perception. In the writing of earlier periods such terms were often adopted self-consciously and their implications philosophized about, actively discussed.<sup>89</sup> Now we use them as routine, casual clichés, only rarely considering their origins.

In 1917 Viktor Schklovsky memorably described the pernicious consequences of familiarity: 'habitualisation devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war'.<sup>90</sup> Glass, having become a similarly intrinsic part of our everyday lives, has gone the same way. No longer merely transparent, it has become all but invisible.

The exception to this state of affairs is, of course, glass used by makers and artists for aesthetic or conceptually expressive purposes. This has become an increasingly significant field of practice over the past 100 years, but is understandably absent from the EAGI's list (above) as it is explicitly not an industrial product. Martha Drexler Lynn<sup>91</sup> tracks the evolution of creative glass through the shifts in terminology used to describe it: In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, designers associated with glass factories (notably Galle and Lalique in France and Tiffany in the United States) supervised the production by teams of glassmakers of sophisticated works of *art glass* intended for discerning customers to buy and display in their homes. This clear division of labour and market focus started to give way as designers and factory-based glassmakers (and artists coming from other media, such as the painter Maurice Marinot in France) began to experiment more directly with glass, exploring and developing the possibilities beyond industrial production.<sup>92</sup> By the 1960s two new terms had emerged, the reversed word order of *glass art* reflected the emphasis on using glass as a means of making *art*, while its

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<sup>89</sup> See for example, Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

<sup>90</sup> *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12.

<sup>91</sup> Martha Drexler Lynn, *American Studio Glass 1960-1990* (Manchester, Vermont: Hudson Hills Press, 2004).

<sup>92</sup> Hugh Wakefield, Robert Jesse Charleston, and Thomas S. Buechner, *Glassware: Mid-19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> Century* <<https://www.britannica.com/art/glassware/Mid-19th-to-20th-century>> [accessed 20 August 2017]

alternative, *studio glass*, represented the new context of individuals working creatively with glass outside the factory setting.

### **Glass movement**

Generally we encounter glass in its ‘cold and sober’<sup>93</sup> state, after its powers have been stilled and tamed, co-opted for our use. The glass itself just sits there, easy to manage, requiring nothing apart from being kept clean. Only when it breaks are we brought up sharp and reminded of the need to treat it with respect. In contrast, working with glass in active mode, or even simply witnessing that working, brings an experience and relationship of a quite different order.

Blown glass made in the hot shop is the paradigm case of the glassmaking process because of its immediacy. Everything happens in full view, in a short time, in close proximity and extreme heat. The shaping of the glowing glass through swinging and spinning, breath and hands-on contact is both dramatic and balletic. Kiln formed glass depends equally on the critical interplay of temperature, volume and positioning, but its transformations happen out of reach and sight and in a longer time frame, often stretching over days. This is not dancing but slow cooking. The metaphors for cold-working processes are different again. But however it is made, glass in the studio has these things in common – it is active not passive, difficult not easy, messy not clean, unpredictable, full of risk and possibility and utterly beguiling. It moves, in every sense, and in extraordinary ways.

Talk to people who attend glass classes, read the statements and biographies of professional makers, and again and again a similar story is told: they came across glass and fell in love, it became an infatuation, a passion, an obsession, took over and, in some cases, changed their lives. A classic redemptive narrative of this sort is contained in the 2015 documentary film about the glassblower Jeremy Maxwell Wintrebert<sup>94</sup> who, and this is no surprise, pinpoints his first experience with a

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<sup>93</sup> *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2 1931-1934*, ed. by M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 734.

<sup>94</sup> *Heart of Glass*, dir. by Jerome de Gerlache, (IMDb, 2015).

blowpipe in the hot shop, 'when I saw the glass move', as his epiphanic moment. Lynn ponders how, particularly in the United States, studio glass came to be seen as a *movement* despite the absence of any shared vision or unified set of goals, and concludes that the single unifying factor was 'a raw enthusiasm for the material itself'.<sup>95</sup> This basis of shared enthusiasm perhaps also explains the strength of the informal networks of connection among the international community of artists who work with glass, and the open welcome afforded to those at every level who seek to join in.

### **Working with glass**

The early days of studio glass were dominated by this fascination. In a keynote lecture to the 2013 conference of the American Glass Art Society, the curator and critic Glenn Adamson describes the first generation of glass artists, enthralled, 'struggling, throwing themselves up against a wall as hard as they can, pushing into space through asymmetry, through mobility, through flow'.<sup>96</sup> Subsequently, as experience and skill levels increased, studio-based glassmaking developed, according to Adamson, along two distinctive paths. The first continued exploring the wayward potential of the material, establishing a repertoire of approaches that foregrounded its kinetic energy and the alternate possibilities that obtain in its molten state, and allowing these a considerable role in shaping the final object.<sup>97</sup> Adherents of the second route were more interested in what could be achieved with glass through masterly control and developed such levels of technical virtuosity that the final products were perhaps more marvels of making than celebrations of the glass.

The common feature of these two divergent strands of activity, besides the shared preoccupation with glass materiality, is that both were dominated in different ways

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<sup>95</sup> Lynn, p.15

<sup>96</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Attack of the Blob: Glass Art and the Will to Form*, Strattman Lecture, Glass Art Society Conference, Toledo USA, 21 November 2013, <<https://vimeo.com/80025507>> [accessed 20 November 2016]

<sup>97</sup> If, indeed, there was a final object - some of the more recent work in this line focuses on properties of glass in action that do not produce a stable outcome, and are, of necessity, ephemeral.

by concerns with glass technique. And one significant consequence was that glassmaking proceeded for some while in a self-reflective bubble, locked in 'a kind of interior discussion that [admitted] very few really rigorous and complex conversations to occur with other fields outside'.<sup>98</sup> These days, however, the boundaries between glass and non-glass are being crossed from all directions and the separating bubble has started to evaporate.

While many glass artists continue to maintain a dedicated and exclusive focus, there are growing numbers of others who only sometimes work with glass or use it in combination with a variety of other materials. Some people have entirely relinquished the physical material while staying with glass as a cultural concept; others have extrapolated from glass to the 'glassiness' of other analogous substances such as ice, water, smoke and soap that similarly melt or flow or burst. And glass is increasingly being used in conceptual, narrative-based or content driven work by people who appreciate its properties but have no direct experience of, or interest in, making glass themselves.

The great variety of boundary spanning work that is being produced in this 'post glass' era and the uncertainty and excitement it generates are visible in various website initiatives emerging over the past few years: In 2008, a 'curatorial team interested in the latent connections between glass and alternate/new media' launched a blog *Howisthisglass?*<sup>99</sup> to investigate the threshold between glass and non-glass, and collect and highlight projects that are 'borderline' glass. A compilation of such projects was presented in the Post-Glass Video Festival, screened at various conferences and venues in the United States and Australia in 2010. In 2011, a group of artists calling themselves Hyperopia Projects organized an exhibition of glass related sculpture entitled *Superposition*. In 2015 they launched *Hyperopia Projects Archives*, described as 'an aggregation of critically-engaged writings, activity, and resources in the field of glass [that lends] a critical mass of

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<sup>98</sup> Adamson, *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> Post Glass Artists / Glass Guerillas, 'How is this Glass?' <<https://howisthisglass.blogspot.com>> [accessed 21 November 2016]

exposure and interconnectedness to otherwise orphaned work'.<sup>100</sup> The *Glass Secessionism* movement<sup>101</sup> was launched on Facebook in 2011 by the American glass artist Tim Tate, who described his manifesto statement as a line drawn in the sand to mark the need to 'step away' from the technique-dominated culture of studio glass. By 2014, the Facebook group had more than 1000 members.<sup>102</sup>

In 1979, in an essay entitled 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', the art theorist Rosalind Krauss discussed the problem of defining the identity of sculpture in the light of the variety of new modes of practice emerging during the 1960s.

Over the last ten years rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert. Nothing, it would seem, could possibly give to such a motley of effort the right to lay claim to whatever one might mean by the category of sculpture. Unless, that is, the category can be made to become almost infinitely malleable.<sup>103</sup>

In 2011 the British artist Jerome Harrington set out together with a group of students and faculty staff in a glass department in the Netherlands to map the similarly expanding field of glass practice, explore the relationships between its very different parts and ultimately to ask whether 'the category of glass practice itself, having been forced to cover such a heterogeneity, [is] in danger of collapsing?'<sup>104</sup>

Project participants used glass-related magazines, catalogues and websites to identify 100 examples of work made since 2000 by an international range of practitioners and applied a consensus process to determine the compatibility of

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<sup>100</sup> Hyperopia Projects, 'Archives', <[hyperopiaprojects.com/archives/](http://hyperopiaprojects.com/archives/)> [accessed 21 November 2016]

<sup>101</sup> Glass Secessionism, <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/glasssecessionism/>> The title references Alfred Steiglitz's Photo Secession of more than a century earlier at a similar moment of perceived crisis in the evolution of photography.

<sup>102</sup> Monica Moses, 'The World Beyond Studio Glass', *American Craft Magazine*, April/May 2014, <<https://craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/world-beyond-studio-glass>> [accessed 21 November 2016]

<sup>103</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October* 8 (Spring, 1979) 30-44, p.30.

<sup>104</sup> Jerome Harrington, *Glass in the Expanded Field*, 2012, p. 2, <[www.jeromeharrington.net](http://www.jeromeharrington.net)> [accessed 10 January 2017]

each with the original skills-based preoccupations of studio glass. The results, presented on a diagram,<sup>105</sup> show a wide distribution of activities including a range of outliers that were perceived to have little or no relation to those preoccupations. These comprise a cluster of works that ‘experiment with new modes of production such as video and performance; explore culturally sited ideas of material but do not use the material itself; challenge the permanence of the art object or notions of ‘finish’; or, employ ambitious site-specific strategies’.<sup>106</sup> In response to the initial question his project posed, Harrington suggests that the diagram depicts not a collapse but rather a dissolving field, whose boundaries are unclear since artists working on the margins are liable to disappear from view, being both estranged from and unrecognized by those who identify closer to the core.

### **My own glass practice**

I began training as a glassmaker in 2008. The process of my education was ad hoc and diverse, a patchwork of short workshops and longer, skills-based courses, all firmly within the studio glass tradition. (fig. 12) Initially I was so enthralled by glassblowing that I barely considered working in any other way, but as I discovered more about the wider repertoire of possible techniques - glass casting, cold-working, fusing, slumping and bending gas-filled tubes - I began exploring those as well.

The first two or three years of learning about glass processes were highly enjoyable, but then my mood began to change. For even as my making abilities gradually improved, I became more conscious of the limits to my skills. I started to feel uneasy about a future trajectory of workshop-based practice that seemed bound to generate an increasingly unwieldy collection of flawed, glass pieces, and I wondered how else I might proceed.

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<sup>105</sup> Krauss used a method known in mathematics as a Klein group, which serially juxtaposes terms against their logical opposites to create an expanded field of definitional possibilities. Harrington’s diagram is plotted on the same basis.

<sup>106</sup> Harrington, p. 9.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Tutors</b>	<b>Fellow students</b>
2008-11	London Glassworks and Liquid Glass (Wiltshire) (many short courses)	Glassblowing, cold-working, fusing and slumping	Studio glass artists	Hot glass enthusiasts
2010	Warm Glass (Zurich) (short course)	Fusing and layering, kiln-worked glass	Sculptor	Experienced in kiln-worked glass
2009-11	Bournemouth & Poole College (Dorset) (full-time two years)	Hot glass techniques, mainly glassblowing	Studio glass artist	Experienced in glassblowing
2010	Domaine de Boisbuchet (France)(workshop)	Uses of hot glass	Architect	Designers
2010	Glass Furnace (Turkey) (workshop)	Cold-working	Studio glass artist	Experienced in cold glass
2011	Pilchuck Glass School (USA) (workshop)	Kiln-working and video projection	Studio glass artist and video maker	Experienced in kiln-worked glass
2011	Domaine de Boisbuchet (France) (two workshops)	Environmental interventions	Architects	Architects
2012	Neon Workshops (Wakefield and Paris) (short courses)	Neon	Neon artists	Neon enthusiasts
2012	Stourbridge Glass Centre (short course)	Water jet cutting	Studio glass artist	Experienced in cold glass
2012	Northlands (Scotland) (workshop)	Fusing and layering kiln worked glass, casting.	Ceramicist	Experienced in kiln-worked glass
2012-13	Westland Place Studios (London) (short courses)	Photography and Photoshop	Photographers	Photographers
2013	Penland School of Crafts (USA) (workshop)	Photography and moving image, video editing	Photographer	Photographers
2013	Haystack Mountain School of Crafts (USA) (workshop)	Hot glass	Conceptual glass artists	Hot glass enthusiasts

*fig. 12. Courses attended, 2008-2013*

Alongside making practice pieces I had been reading about glass, exploring its history and multi-faceted significance. I was fascinated by the extent to which our general language has become perfused by terms related to qualities and properties of glass, particularly the glass-related optical concepts which act as metaphors for perception. And as I reflected on its cultural impacts on how we see and think, I realized there could be many ways to ‘work with glass’ beyond the convention of

making useful/beautiful/imaginative objects out of it, which had been my goal until that point. So, thinking laterally, I started exploring ‘post-glass’ activities and practices and was enthused by the energy and openness I saw in other people’s work. But my own efforts continued to lack direction until the moment described in the Introduction, when I decided to use glass as a resource and stimulus to draw attention to textures of place.

A key catalyst for my thinking about how to do this came from the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, whose writings I came across by chance. Kuma rejects the idea of treating a building as a discrete, concrete object to be admired. In his view, ‘no particular skill or effort is required to turn something into an object. Preventing a thing from becoming an object is a far more difficult [and far more worthwhile] task’.<sup>107</sup> Kuma is interested in how architectural materials can be integrated within an environment so as to create ‘conditions’ that enhance the user’s experience of that environment. In his book *Anti-Object* he elaborates his project of ‘erasing’ architecture - making the form and boundaries of a building as conceptually invisible and physically transparent as possible - in order to focus instead on its mediating role. Kuma’s arguments and examples are both stimulating and persuasive and got me thinking about how, similarly, I might divert attention away from glass itself whilst at the same time co-opting its agency to mediate experience of qualities of place. By the time I actually started this project, my practice was accelerating towards the edges of Harrington’s expanded field. I was still thinking *with* and *through* glass, but looking *at* it hardly at all.

### **Glass and place**

In Chapter 4 I explain the overall approach I have adopted in this project, which involves working with the ‘travelling’ precepts of the essay form. Crudely summarizing here: I knew roughly where I was aiming for and had identified a resource that I believed could help me get there, but I had no preconceived ideas about the route. The plan was rather *to have no plan* beyond a commitment to

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<sup>107</sup> Kengo Kuma, *Anti-Object* (London: Architectural Association, 2008), p. 51.



following my nose and doing whatever seemed appropriate as I went along. Nevertheless, before setting out it seemed a good idea to look out for others exploring in similar territory and see what I might learn from what they were doing.

I did not attempt a comprehensive review of what else might be going on (and am indeed unclear how one might do that in such a loosely defined area). But I identified five artists (Stine Bidstrup, Ted Sonnenschein, Jim Dingilian, Walead Beshty and Annie Cattrell) whose work seemed to resonate in one way or another with my own developing ideas. Their approaches gave me pause for thought as well as encouragement about the wide range of possible ways to proceed. The next several paragraphs summarise what I found most relevant about each of them.

Stine Bidstrup is an artist who works with glass sculpture, installation and video to investigate our perceptions of the world, both visual and cognitive. She is curious both about our failure to see things, because of the blind spot at the centre of our vision, and the fact that we do not know that we are not seeing, because our eyes always compensate. In her work with glass she tries 'to move these blind spots, in an effort to catch a glimpse of what has been invisible'<sup>108</sup> and thereby to draw the viewer's attention to the nature of their own noticing. She uses the optical effects of glass, particularly distortion and reflection, to generate heightened visual experiences. Her 2005-2009 series *Sites and Sights* involved organic blown forms filled with water. (fig. 13) She juxtaposed these 'optical blobs' without explanation against familiar sights in ordinary locations, capitalising on the way that 'cognition stubs its toes'<sup>109</sup> when things are encountered in an unfamiliar context. For subject matter she particularly favours 'the objects and spaces of everyday life [...] the details and the unseen of our everyday experience [...] because this is where we rarely notice how culturally determined our perception is, how 'un-natural' we are'.

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<sup>108</sup> Stine Bidstrup, 'Optical Constructions', <[http://www.stinebidstrup.dk/Bidstrup\\_Essay.html](http://www.stinebidstrup.dk/Bidstrup_Essay.html)> [accessed 21 November 2016]

<sup>109</sup> Robin Rice, 'Essay on the Work of Stine Bidstrup', <[http://www.stinebidstrup.dk/Rice\\_Essay.htm](http://www.stinebidstrup.dk/Rice_Essay.htm)> [accessed 21 November 2016]



fig. 13. Stine Bidstrup, 'Sights and Sites II' 2007, blown glass and water<sup>110</sup>

Ted Sonnenschein is a photographer and video artist who is interested in how the glass present in everyday environments in the form of windows and mirrors casually mediates the appearance and experience of those environments through its optical effects. His approach is non-interventionist; he works with what is already there. In the *Berlin S-Bahn* project begun in 2008, he uses continuous unedited video footage recorded on static cameras inside train carriages to document the changing rhythms and patterns of light and imagery transmitted by, reflected on and visible through the train's windows as it travels between stations. (fig. 14) The moving train is thereby revealed as a complex optical instrument in its own right, 'a cinema that acts as camera, projector and theatre all in one'.<sup>111</sup> Sonnenschein uses the train 'as a dolly' for his own camera to capture the train's 'performance'. The resulting videos enable us as viewers to reflect on what happens in the space of the train, both as passengers and spectators.

<sup>110</sup> Source of image: <[http://www.stinebidstrup.dk/selected\\_exh\\_sightsII\\_1.html](http://www.stinebidstrup.dk/selected_exh_sightsII_1.html)> [accessed 21 November 2016]

<sup>111</sup> Ted Sonnenschein, 'Train Songs', uploaded 23 July 2010, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akjdIGHAxBg>> [accessed 1 February 2016]



fig. 14. Ted Sonnenschein, 'Stained Glass' 2010, video, 01' 49"<sup>112</sup>

Jim Dingilian also trained as a photographer. He is interested in the ambiguity of places at the margins - car park edges, backs of shopping centres, patches of wood between housing developments - the various kinds of peripheral no-man's-land that exist everywhere, but are typically overlooked. His *Smoke Drawings* use found glass in the form of discarded empty liquor bottles, the normal litter of such places. The bottles are filled with candle smoke, which adheres to the inside surface. The soot is then meticulously brushed away to leave fragile images that look like faded monochrome photos of the places where the bottles were found. (fig. 15) Messages-in-bottles in other circumstances are floated out in hope, but tend to disappear. Dingilian's bottles have a different trajectory, first left for dead but then resurrected and given new status: 'When found by the sides of roads or in the weeds near the edges of parking lots, empty liquor bottles are artefacts of consumption, delight, or dread. As art objects they become hour glasses of sorts, their drained interiors now inhabited by dim memories'.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Source of image: <<https://vimeo.com/111008364>> [accessed 21 November 2016]

<sup>113</sup> Jim Dingilian, 'Smoke Drawings', <<https://www.packergallery.com/dingilian/>> [accessed 21 November 2016]



fig. 15. Jim Dingilian, 'Unspoken Conclusion (Footbridge)' 2009, smoke and glass, 8" x 3.5" x 1.5" Private Collection, courtesy the artist and McKenzie Fine Art, NY.

Walead Beshty is an artist and writer whose work investigates the processes, practices and systems in play in different situations and environments. He employs materials such as glass, copper and unexposed film, inserting them into his chosen settings in ways that will snag and capture substantive traces of the things that happen in those places, and thereby make them visible. In his *Mirrored Floor* works, a floor of laminated mirrored glass is installed throughout the exhibition space of a



gallery. (fig. 16) As the glass is walked on it progressively deteriorates and the accumulating cracks gradually break up the reflections of whatever is being shown on the surrounding walls, drawing visitors' attention to their own participation as viewers and altering the experience of the exhibition:

'While Beshty's floor may lack an image of its own, it absorbs the world around it through reflection, becoming by virtue of context a highly representational device. Over time and through use [it takes apart] the images of the objects we see in it, until finally that reflected world is nothing more than a dense matrix of [...] jagged lines'.<sup>114</sup>



fig. 16. Walead Beshty, *Untitled* (LAXART: Los Angeles, California, March 21-May 2, 2009), 2009: laminated mirror and glass, neoprene<sup>115</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Bedford, 'The Rose Art Museum opens exhibitions by Walead Beshty and Sam Jury', <http://artdaily.com/news/60706/The-Rose-Art-Museum-opens-exhibitions-by-Walead-Beshty-and-Sam-Jury> [accessed 30 January 2016]

<sup>115</sup> Source of image: <http://www.thomasdanegallery.com/artists/34-walead-beshty/works> [accessed 21 November 2016]

Annie Cattrell is a sculptor who uses a variety of materials, including glass, in conjunction with state-of-the-art scanning techniques to capture and make manifest specific states and moments (breath inside a lung, cloud formations) that are commonly experienced, but often neither seen or noticed. Her 2008 work *Echo* came about through a commission that invited her to respond to the forest in which it is located. (fig. 17)



fig. 17. Annie Cattrell, 'Echo' 2008, cast resin and aluminium dust<sup>116</sup>

The piece, which Cattrell describes as a 3D photograph, is a life-sized double cast of the actual quarry face behind it, showing positive and negative impressions front and back. Having first explored the topology of the forest using laser scanning, she cast the work in resin impregnated with aluminium dust. The sculpture 'is physical evidence of contact between the human hand and the hosting landscape, which has

<sup>116</sup> Source of image:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/73/Annie\\_Cattrell\\_Echo.jpg/512px-Annie\\_Cattrell\\_Echo.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/73/Annie_Cattrell_Echo.jpg/512px-Annie_Cattrell_Echo.jpg)

been modelled by both industry and nature. That point of contact will be held in a moment, whilst the material of the forest continues to degenerate and collapse, [its echo] in the form of the sculpture, will remain'.<sup>117</sup>

All the works highlighted above are effectively projects of attention, intended to nudge the observer's noticing of their own experience and/or the world around them. As such, all have features of both art and documentary. They also share several other commonalities of style and outlook that seem potentially appropriate for me too.

Firstly, they employ a range of types of glass (or in one case resin) including purpose made hand blown and hand cast pieces, industrially made materials and commercially produced objects, and a variety of properties of glass including reflection, transparency, distortion, brittleness, durability and cultural associations, to create their impact. In all cases, as with Kuma's architecture, the observer's attention is deflected through/past/away from the material objects or glass 'screens' towards other considerations, both substantive and conceptual. This is achieved by a combination of juxtaposition and referencing and imaginative appreciation of the inherent dynamics of the various physical sites and settings. In all five cases there is a strong sense of co-production, such that the places themselves and the glass both play an active role in generating meaning.

Secondly, the sites and settings chosen are unexceptional examples of familiar places and situations selected and valued on account of their ordinariness, their taken-for-granted status in the places they belong. This casual quality is mirrored in a lack of preciousness in the works. Though the pieces may be clever, technically sophisticated and beautiful, their impact is not achieved through attention-grabbing skills and the materials are not conspicuously expensive. They all (apart from Annie Cattrell's *Echo*) use ordinary glass.

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<sup>117</sup> Forest of Dean Sculpture Trust, 'Echo – A New Sculpture on the Sculpture Trail' <https://www.artrabbit.com/events/new-work-by-annie-cattrell> [accessed 8 February 2016]

Thirdly, any potential polemical weighting is similarly downplayed. All the works are allowed to speak for themselves, with little overt authorial direction. The gallery write-up about Jim Dingilian notes that 'his attitude regarding [the places he works with] is neither ironic nor condemning'.<sup>118</sup> And that is true for all these pieces, the artists do not reveal what they think about their subjects but leave us, as viewers, to make of them what we will.

And, finally, the pieces are open-ended in a more literal sense. They are not static, finished products but works-in-progress about life-in-progress. Once made, most are re-inserted, unguarded, into the everyday world (or floated in the ether on the internet) and their meanings and impacts continue to evolve, unmonitored. Some change over time in relation to their settings, others remain resilient while things change round them. The glass forms that Stine Bidstrup leaves around the streets apparently tend to vanish quite quickly, taken away by people who like them, and she is content for that to happen.

I wrote earlier about the dissolving boundary between glass and non-glass, and these cases are clear evidence of how that boundary has now disappeared. They also undermine and play on the other major separation discussed earlier - between glass as used and appreciated in artistic practice and glass as used and neglected in the ordinary world. This was the hybrid zone in which my own project seemed likely to be located, and I was glad to find myself in such good company.

### **Glass process**

As a coda to this chapter I return to the matter of making, that is, to the actual process of working with glass, which is such a powerful experience.

The summer before starting this research, I attended a course in Turkey taught by the Czech glass artist Vladimir Klein. The focus was on cold working (cutting, abrading, polishing) as a principal creative method of working with glass (rather than in combination with, or simply as a method of finishing or decorating, hot,

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<sup>118</sup> Dingilian



warm or kiln formed glass). The course took place in an old glass factory in the countryside near Istanbul. We spent the first afternoon in a nearby field, poking around in bramble-covered heaps of discarded tesserae to uncover huge shapeless boulders of dirty pink or greenish glass, the weathered remnants of old pot melts from the factory's glassblowing furnaces. These were to be the raw material for our workshop. Having each chosen a lump or two we liked the look of, we worked on them over the next ten days, running through the gamut of cold working tools and techniques, from initial rough shaping with hammer and chisel via ascending stages of refinement to delicate engraving and the finest, gleaming polish achievable with cerium powder.

Along the way, Vladimir's plan was for us to find the necessary balance between what he described as Apollonian (rational planning) and Dionysian (intuitive and improvisatory) approaches.<sup>119</sup> He knew the glass itself would force this learning, as it was un-annealed, full of tension, and liable to crack and shatter unpredictably in response to mechanical shocks. Whatever ideas we began with were likely to be thwarted as we tried to realize them. So the only thing to do was go *with* the glass, watching it closely as we worked, pursuing possibilities as they emerged and adapting our thinking each time a new flaw was revealed or a cherished section broke off.

The pieces we went home with at the end of the course were hybrids: solid objects certainly, both made by us and found in the glass, but also forms of evidence, documents of process, embodying the circumstances of that workshop with its characteristic conjunctions of material, people and tools.

It seemed to me that what I have described here could turn out to be an apposite metaphor for the overall process of making this 'PhD by practice'. I could not guess beforehand how glass might also literally shape my project (as distinct from me

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<sup>119</sup> Vladimir Klein, 'Glass as a Three-dimensional Sculptural Medium', interview in *Spa Magazine*, 2008, <[https://www.belohrad.cz/downloads/lazensky.../lazensky\\_zpravodaj\\_08\\_en.pdf](https://www.belohrad.cz/downloads/lazensky.../lazensky_zpravodaj_08_en.pdf)> [accessed 8 February 2016]

shaping it), but it seemed quite likely, given what I had learned about its powers, that this would somehow happen.

## 4 Essaying

Thus far I have examined other people's approaches to investigating qualities of place. This chapter outlines my own intentions, identifying firstly what I planned to look for and then describing in broad terms how I proposed to go about it, through adopting and adapting the 'essay' form.

### What

The vignettes described in the Introduction are indicative of the scale and nature of my interests. I have no wish to generate grand polyphonic accounts like Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin*, a symphonic film created 'out of the millions of energies that comprise the life of a big city',<sup>120</sup> or even more modest chamber works like Charles Ives' *Central Park*. I am taken, rather, with the power that a single 'neglected detail and small nuance',<sup>121</sup> can have, once noticed, to modify one's overall perception of a place.

As I worked on my glass that summer in Turkey, I thought about facets. The dictionary defines a facet (from the French *facette* – a 'little face') as both 'a small plane surface (as on a cut gem)' and 'any of the definable aspects that make up a subject (of contemplation) or an object (of consideration)'.<sup>122</sup> Faceting as a means of classification was developed in the 1960s by the Indian mathematician SR Ranganathan and is used to organize and search for information about all sorts of changeable phenomena that defy easy description (including material on the world wide web). The notion of faceting 'rests on the belief that there is more than one way to view the world, and that even those classifications that are viewed as stable are in fact provisional and dynamic'.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Walter Ruttmann, *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, a film with music by Edmund Meisel (1927). Ruttmann speaking in 1928: [www.silentsaregolden.com/DeBartoloreviews/rdbberlinsymphony.html](http://www.silentsaregolden.com/DeBartoloreviews/rdbberlinsymphony.html) [accessed 18 November 2016]

<sup>121</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.152.

<sup>122</sup> Merriam-Webster.com/dictionary/facet

<sup>123</sup> Barbara H. Kwasnik, 'The Role of Classification in Knowledge Representation and Discovery', *Library Trends* 48 (1999), 22-47 (p. 23).

In traditional Aristotelian classification by hierarchy, a topic is sequentially broken down into increasingly finely differentiated categories; in the 'tree' system, likewise, an entity is disaggregated into its different component parts. Both systems depend on prior knowledge of a subject and its internal relationships and a settled view about which features of it matter most. The faceted approach is different. While an entity may be considered from any number of angles its integrity as an object remains unaltered, each angle being a perspective on the whole. Faceted schemes can be developed without good knowledge or strong theory. They are 'hospitable', 'flexible' and 'expressive', less useful than the other earlier systems for organizing what is already clearly understood, but more accommodating of new information and more enabling of discovery. One problem with facets, though, is that it can be difficult to tell which dimensions are meaningful, another is that multiple facets are hard to visualize and present concurrently.<sup>124</sup>

On a gemstone, a facet is a polished surface that enables light to enter the stone and ricochet around inside before exiting again towards the viewer. Faceting creates liveliness, transforming a 'rough' stone into one that attracts attention, sparkling with brilliance (internally reflected light), fire (spectral dispersion) and scintillation (outwardly directed flashes). But a facet must be cut at the 'critical angle'. If it is too shallow the light passes directly through and out the other side, producing a dull transparent 'window'; if too deep it leads to 'extinction', a dark patch where the light just disappears. Gauging the critical angle correctly requires careful observation and deep familiarity with the material, though it can also be calculated by a formula that uses knowledge of the refractive index.<sup>125</sup>

Taking its different meanings together, I decided that the facet was a good metaphor for what I hoped to access in this project: not the fixed essence of a place's character, but its indeterminate, changing qualities; not an overall account

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<sup>124</sup> Kwasnik gives this example: 'It is difficult to see a vase in the context of other vases, of other Japanese artifacts, of other clay objects, of other raku objects, and so on, all at the same time', p. 24.

<sup>125</sup> See for example <[www.gemsociety.org/jewelry-lapidary/cutting-information-for-specific-gemstones/](http://www.gemsociety.org/jewelry-lapidary/cutting-information-for-specific-gemstones/)> [accessed 19 November 2016]

of its texture but something more modest, a single telling feature among many possibilities, but one nevertheless that critically illuminates the whole. But thinking about facets also highlighted the challenges I would face in searching for something without quite knowing what it might look like and choosing an angle for ‘cutting and polishing’ on the basis of intuition alone. The venture would be one of trial and error, whose outcome would depend a fair amount on luck and chance.

## How

I came across the idea of the ‘essay’ as a mode of enquiry through reading Michael Sheringham’s description of its ‘open-minded, mind-opening’ character. The qualities of the essay, he suggests, make it particularly well suited for reflecting on ‘the everyday’:

Eating, sleeping, walking, reading, working, resting, buying, conversing, are all things we can have ideas about, abstractly and analytically. They can all be analysed, separately or in various combinations, by innumerable discourses and disciplines. But to try and grasp their everydayness, the experience, rather than the simple fact, of repetition, of the rhythm of things; to try and grasp how it “all hangs together” [...] here and now, is to forget what we generally think of as knowledge – as the essay characteristically does.<sup>126</sup>

The more I subsequently read about the essay the more I liked it, and the more appropriate it also looked to be for investigating textures of place. Like Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*,<sup>127</sup> who belatedly discovers he has been speaking in prose for 40 years, I realised I had been by inclination an essayist for a similar length of time.

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<sup>126</sup> Sheringham, p. 49.

<sup>127</sup> Molière, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, a comedy-ballet written in 1670, trans. by Philip Dwight Jones at: <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2992/2992-h/2992-h.htm>>[accessed 11 December 2016]

To essay means, in general terms, to weigh, test out, experiment, attempt. Essaying in the more specific literary sense, as a process of self-reflexive exploratory writing, was invented by Michel de Montaigne in 1572 and has flourished since then in diverse hands and forms. The one agreed fact about the essay is that it is impossible to define, but it has distinctive features of tone and approach. A key assumption that underlies it is that nothing, neither the self nor the world, is ever certain or stays the same. As Montaigne observes: 'the world is but perpetual motion; all things in it move incessantly, – the earth, the rocks of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt, – both with the universal motion and with their own; fixedness itself is only a more lingering motion'.<sup>128</sup> The essay embraces this changeability. Its desire, according to Theodor Adorno, is not like science or philosophy, 'to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory' but rather 'to make the transitory eternal'.<sup>129</sup> It is, says Graham Good:

A reflection of and on the changing self in the changing world, not the pure, abstract Cartesian construction of the self or Newtonian construction of the world, but a construction of, and a response to, this time and place in the world, by this self [...] The essay makes a claim to truth, but not permanent truth. Its truths are particular, of the here and now. Other times and places are not its affair.<sup>130</sup>

The essayist uses her or his embodied experience as a starting point for trying to make sense of, express or realise something about the world. And this experience is confronted, 'without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness seeking to perceive it as it stands'.<sup>131</sup> 'Actually', says Adorno, in an essay 'the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it. While even traditional

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<sup>128</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. by George B. Ives (New York: The Heritage Press, 1946) (Book III, p.1088).

<sup>129</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, 32 (Spring-Summer 1984), 151-71, (p. 59).

<sup>130</sup> Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 4 and 23.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Agee, and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 11.

thought draws its impulse from such experience, such thought by its form eliminates the remembrance of these impulses. The essay, on the other hand, takes them as its model [...] it proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically [...] it thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over'.<sup>132</sup>

Essays are preservative, keeping 'notions and ways alive, preventing [them] turning rancid and indigestible'.<sup>133</sup> An essay attends to its object not by pinning it down or tying it up, reducing or translating it into a recognisable, stable form, but in a different more accommodating way, 'without doing violence to it'.<sup>134</sup> The success of an essay depends instead on its aesthetic character, the rightness of 'fit' between what it says, how it says it and the character of what it speaks about. Its content is thus inseparable from its form; its 'living wisdom' cannot be summarised or extracted. Should this be attempted, notes Robert Musil, only as much of it will remain 'as of the delicately opalescent body of a jellyfish when one lifts it out of the water and lays it on the sand'.<sup>135</sup>

As for subject matter, George Douglas Atkins draws a distinction between 'personal' and 'familiar' essays:

The personal essay smacks of Swift's allegorical Spider, which spins its webs out of its own innards, reliant upon little but the self. The familiar essay smacks of Swift's Bee, which "by an universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax." The familiar essay is *about* this or that [...] matter and not simply the writer's life.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Adorno, pp.161 and 164.

<sup>133</sup> George Douglas Atkins, *Reading Essays: An invitation* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>134</sup> Adorno, p. 169.

<sup>135</sup> Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (London: Picador, 1995), p. 274.

<sup>136</sup> George Douglas Atkins, *On the Familiar Essay: Challenging Academic Orthodoxies* (New York: MacMillan, 2009), p. x. (italics in the original)

The subject matter of a familiar essay is ordinary rather than esoteric, and the essay's stance towards its subject tends to be sympathetic. Essays are frequently affirmative 'of perspectives, positions and values threatened with extinction or, less dramatically, second class citizenship [...] they infuse the familiar with interest, power, relevance and significance, thus revealing the extraordinary capacities of the ordinary'.<sup>137</sup> The essay's stance towards its readers is also positive, it is 'a peaceable form [...] respectful and inviting of others. [It eschews] the militaristic language and strategies of much – indeed, most – academic writing, which desires to overcome opponents, master texts, and, above all, *to win* [...] Essays clear a place for you to stand and to bring your everyday tools of attention and observation to bear'.<sup>138</sup>

The essay is a literary mode, but the language of essaying is full of metaphors of practical activity. 'Flying, slithering, flowing, journeying, walking, rambling, wandering, meandering, roaming, exploring, searching, seeking, venturing, following, tracking, hunting and transgressing' are all common tropes.<sup>139</sup> According to Graham Good the essay is '*essentially* a peripatetic or ambulatory form',<sup>140</sup> a form of journeying, but one distinguished by its spontaneity. 'The route is not planned beforehand, [it] is mapped in the going. And except for a general familiarity with the terrain to be walked, there's no anticipating what will come your way; you set out to see what is out there to be seen'.<sup>141</sup> On the journey, the essayist is alert and curious, actively engaged. 'He writes essayistically,' says Max Bense, 'who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of the writing'.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Atkins, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, pp.5 and 7, (italics in the original)

<sup>139</sup> Paul Heilker, *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), p. 169.

<sup>140</sup> Graham Good, p. 15. (italics in the original)

<sup>141</sup> Lydia Fakundiny, *The Art of the Essay* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p.16.

<sup>142</sup> Max Bense, 'Über den Essay und seine Prosa', *Merkur* 1:3 (1947), 418, quoted in Adorno, p.164.



Adorno summarises the type of learning acquired through essaying by comparing it to:

The behaviour of a man who is obliged, in a foreign country, to speak that country's language instead of patching it together from its elements, as he did in school. He will read without a dictionary. If he has looked at the same word thirty times, in constantly changing contexts, he has a clearer grasp of it than he would if he looked up all the word's meanings; meanings that are generally too narrow, considering they change depending on the context, and too vague in view of the nuances that the context establishes in every individual case.<sup>143</sup>

If place is substituted for language the analogy works just as well. The familiar essay, I concluded, would be an apt means of gaining a situated awareness of place that transcends definition. The question therefore was how to set about it. The next section outlines my plans.

### **Practical plans**

The obvious challenge for this project is that all the essaying discussed above depends on words (even in film and photo essays the narrative overlay tends to be regarded as a crucial element<sup>144</sup>). As Genese Grill observes, 'language can, and all too often does, enable clichéd seeing'.<sup>145</sup> The process of naming something precipitates it out from the wider flow, standardising, petrifying and creating it as a separate object. The aspects of place that interest me cannot be captured or written about in words without risk of being de-natured (this had been one reason

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<sup>143</sup> Adorno, p. 161.

<sup>144</sup> Many 'essay films' incorporate verbal language in the form of an authorial voice-over, though this can also surface expressively in other forms 'via montage, camera movement and so on.' Paul Arthur, 'Essay questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore', *Film Comment*, 39 (2003), 58-62 (p.59).

<sup>145</sup> Genese Grill, *The World as Metaphor in Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2012), pp. 55-56.

for my turn to glass). So in this project I decided to embrace the principles of essaying in a different mode, by taking its metaphors entirely literally.

When we work long at a thing and come to know it up and down, in and out, through and through, it becomes in a quite remarkable way translucent. The botanist can see through his tree, see wood and bast... The zoologist can in the same way see through the snail in the thorn, seeing as in a glass model everything in its place, the nerve-centres, the muscles, the stomach, the beating heart, the coursing blood...<sup>146</sup>

I would 'see through' places by occupying them physically, wandering and wondering all senses alert, 'groaping and feeling of the way with [my] hande'<sup>147</sup> as the essayist does, and capitalising on serendipitous events. Much as Richard Long's walks and stone-shifting practices *are* his sculptures, the integrated processes involved in trying to notice - being *and* doing *and* looking *and* thinking *and* making in real time and space - would *be* my essays. The facets of place I managed to access would be embodied and revealed in what I made along the way.

A second point about the literary essay is that it is a device, not an event. Essays are often written *as if* they are unfolding over time. An essay '*enacts* the evolution of an author's understanding, [it] *embodies* an author's sceptical groping towards an uncertain truth'<sup>148</sup> and thereby it produces 'the artistic or literary effect or illusion of thinking in progress'.<sup>149</sup> An essay may indeed be a faithful account of a real experience, but it could equally well be entirely invented. As John Schilb

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<sup>146</sup> J. A. Thomson, *Introduction to Science* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1911), pp. 27-8, quoted in Tim Ingold, *Lines. A Brief History* (Oxford, Routledge, 2007), p. 61.

<sup>147</sup> Definition of the word 'essay' in John Baret's *Alvearie or Quadruple Dictionary* from 1580, quoted in Wilbert Lorne MacDonald, *Beginnings of the English Essay*, University of Toronto Studies, Philological Series No, 3 (Toronto: The University Library, 1914), p. 3.

<sup>148</sup> Heilker, p. 67. (italics added)

<sup>149</sup> George Douglas Atkins, *Estranging the Familiar: Towards a Revitalized Critical Writing* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 6.

acknowledges, 'essayists are not necessarily engaged in falsifying experience. But neither', he says, 'are they reporting it directly. Rather, they are *simulating* it'.<sup>150</sup>

Richard Long documents his walks and works through text and photographs, thereby ensuring a lasting and transferable record of activities that would otherwise go unobserved. The status of his documentation is hard to define; it both reports on and constitutes a part of his oeuvre. It is overtly objective and covertly selective (for example, the work involved in heaving stones is never shown<sup>151</sup>). I planned to document my essays too, through a reflective log describing what happened, how and why for each attempt. But my texts would be more frank than artful accounts, describing the actual essaying process as truthfully as I could.

### *Settings*

I anticipated that the 'fieldwork' element of my research would comprise a number of what EB White describes as small 'excursions'. 'Each new excursion of the essayist', he says, 'differs from the last and takes him into new country'.<sup>152</sup> But what new country I would visit was uncertain. Unlike the painter George Shaw, I had no special territory in mind to prowl around, no view in advance about particular places or kinds of places that I wanted to focus on. Judging by my past experience I guessed they would select themselves, emerging as places that piqued my curiosity in the ordinary course of living my life over the period of the project.

As for how many essays there would be, again I could not tell beforehand. Quantitative researchers do 'power calculations' to ascertain how big a sample will be needed to show up an anticipated effect; qualitative researchers employ the concept of 'saturation' to determine the optimum amount of data to collect, beyond which additional information will be repetitious, contributing no significant

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<sup>150</sup> John Schilb, 'Reprocessing the Essay', in *Post-process Theory: Beyond the Writing Paradigm* ed. by Thomas Kent (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 198-214, (p. 201). (italics added)

<sup>151</sup> Ruth Rosengarten, 'Heaven and Earth: The Work of Richard Long', *London Grip* (June, 2009), <<http://www.londongrip.co.uk/2009/06/art-the-work-of-richard-long/>> [accessed 4 December 2016]

<sup>152</sup> E.B. White, *Essays of E B White* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1977), pp. vii-viii.

new insights about the topic of investigation. But essayists seek neither proof nor closure; instead, they revel in the confidence that there is always more to know. An essay is 'not exhaustive [...] never more than an attempt, a go at something that might be tried again on another occasion, in quite a different way'.<sup>153</sup> Like the works of the artists discussed in earlier chapters, 'the essay casts one loop after another to ensnare the fugitive'<sup>154</sup> and its conclusions are similarly provisional; the next day or the next piece has the welcome potential to enrich the texture by adding further insights.<sup>155</sup> So it made no sense to think in terms of a minimum or optimum number of essays for this project. It would be simply a matter of what could be done in the time available and accommodated in the space of the thesis. In the event, discounting a few aborted efforts, I made nine attempts. Of these, seven concern places that I know well in London, two arose from travels further afield.

### *Materials and tools*

I already had some broad ideas (as discussed in earlier chapters) about ways and means of working, but beyond those I expected to develop my methods as I went along. In between my 'small excursions' I planned to continue working in the glass studio in a more general way without specific aims, experimenting with forms of making that might somehow come in useful. However, I was also wary of my chosen starting point in glass, strongly conscious of Abraham Maslow's dictum that, 'it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it is a nail'.<sup>156</sup> I was determined that glass should have an enabling, not constraining role in the project. I would use it in any way that appeared to be helpful, but have no compunction about jettisoning it, should it start to limit the view.

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<sup>153</sup> Fakundiny, p.16.

<sup>154</sup> William Zeiger, 'The Personal Essay and Egalitarian Rhetoric', in *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy* ed. by Chris Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 240.

<sup>155</sup> Many essays are quite short, but Montaigne never stopped adding bits to his. Robert Musil, whose essay novel *The Man Without Qualities* runs for thousands of pages, claimed he would end in the middle of a sentence with a comma, and effectively did so by leaving the third volume unfinished at his death.

<sup>156</sup> Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance* (New York: Harper, 1966), p. 15.

The essayist has been described as a quilter,<sup>157</sup> a bricoleur, someone 'who fashions meaning out of experience, using whatever aesthetic and instrumental tools there are available'.<sup>158</sup> Essayists happily plunder other texts and disciplines, using quotations 'like instruments in an orchestra',<sup>159</sup> not as evidence or justification but as touchstones to bounce off and brighten their own lines of thought. In that spirit, from the start, I planned to cast a wider net, arrogating to myself the freedom to draw upon any other ideas, materials and ways of working I came across that might be helpful for my essays, irrespective of what they appeared to have to do with glass.

### *Presentation and analysis*

Atkins suggests that essays, 'function laterally more than vertically, eschewing depth in favour of relations'. 'You best understand a particular essay when you place its parts side by side, considering their relation to each other and to the whole [and] you best appreciate a particular essay when you place it in relation to other instances of its kind.'<sup>160</sup> In his poem *Dry Salvages*, TS Eliot writes: 'we had the experience but missed the meaning / and approach to the meaning restores the experience / in a different form'.<sup>161</sup> I think this applies in the reverse direction too. The made and written elements of my work stand alone, in that the visual pieces present the textural experience of place unmediated by language, while the words are meaningful without seeing the actual pieces.<sup>162</sup> But they are also complementary, each adding to the other when both are 'read' together.

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<sup>157</sup> Atkins 1992, p. 21.

<sup>158</sup> Norman K. Denzin, 'Romancing the Text: The Qualitative Researcher-Writer-as-Bricoleur' *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 122 (Fall, 1994), 15-30, (p. 15).

<sup>159</sup> William H. Gass, Extract from 'Emerson and the Essay', in *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Times*, ed. by Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 106-109, (p. 109).

<sup>160</sup> Atkins, 2008, pp. 13-14.

<sup>161</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 26.

<sup>162</sup> In their photo essay about sharecropping families in the Great Depression, James Agee and Walker Evans point up this independence by publishing the photographic and narrative components in separate volumes, rather than interleaving them.

In Chapter 5 and the outputs that accompany it, the course of each of my explorations is presented in three ways: through visual evidence of the ‘facets’ that were found and cut and polished; through a textual log, as mentioned earlier, of the path followed and the processes of looking and making involved in the journey; and through noting of ideas, new leads and challenges thrown up by the experience. The subsequent discussion in Chapter 6 takes all the essays together as a constellation, reflecting on their ‘mosaic-like’<sup>163</sup> relations with one another as intersecting fragments within the larger multi-modal essay on glass and place which is this thesis overall.

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<sup>163</sup> Adorno, p. 164

## 5 Nine attempts

'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'<sup>164</sup>

*One morning sky*

*Two cycling and passing*

*Three traffic junction*

*Four Overground train*

*Five kitchen shelves*

*Six forest floor*

*Seven Broad Walk*

*Eight bus journey*

*Nine Atacama Desert*

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<sup>164</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), p. 8.

## *One morning sky*

The first attempt I made was certainly shaped by concerns about place, but not at all in the way I had intended and have so far discussed. This was place as position and status. The matter at issue was my own sense of place as a new research student doing a PhD by Practice in the Ceramics & Glass department at the Royal College of Art. The decisions I took were, I think, driven largely by the need to get a footing in that environment.

### **How it happened**

It felt important to do something quickly to establish my credentials as a glassmaker and get the project off the ground. At such an early stage it hardly seemed to matter what I made, but my original vignettes (as described in the Introduction) looked like a good place to start, so I chose this one:

*My bedroom window from 7.45 to 8.00am - nine planes go past consecutively, each one's sound emerging, growing, hanging, falling slowly in pitch and fading away. The sound is detached in time from the sight, which comes later if at all (not when it's cloudy). The evidence of what was there in the vapour trail, and its gradual relaxation and re-absorption. The history of the past few minutes inscribed on the sky. Sometimes the trails cross. And the sound varies according to the weather and time of year - the best indicating, without even opening my eyes, the arrival of a fine, high July day.*

Poking about in my toolbox while wondering where to begin, I found a rod of opal glass labeled 'Sky Blue'<sup>165</sup> left over from a previous piece of work. The name seemed unconvincing, so I decided to test it against a photo of the summer sky. (fig. 18) Surprisingly, the colour match was perfect, and that set me thinking. I realized that if I blew the glass out in a vessel the tint would vary just as the sky does from pale to deeper blue. And layered thinly over white it might also match the sky for

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<sup>165</sup> Kugler colour code: 2080



luminosity. And it might be possible to make convincing 'vapour trails' on such a vessel by etching and re-melting lines using the Graal technique.<sup>166</sup> And, with the technical assistance available in the RCA hot shop, such a vessel could be impressively big. And so, within a few short moments, against all my intentions for the project overall, I reverted to technique-led glass thinking of the most conventional kind.



*fig. 18. Vapour trails in the sky above my house, 2011*

I went ahead and made the piece - a large, spherical, opaque glass vessel, flattened just enough to stand. (fig. 19) On the Graal blank I engraved a single continuous line, cutting through the outer blue casing to reveal the white glass underneath. The line spiralled round the form, returning across its own path twice. When the blank was reheated, dipped in clear glass and blown up large, the cut edges stretched and melted back, blurring the visible line of white.

<sup>166</sup> Graal is a glass technique developed by Knut Bergkvist at Orrefors in Sweden in 1916. A coloured core of glass is encased in a second layer. The 'blank' glass is allowed to cool and a design applied by engraving through the outer layer. The glass is then reheated and blown into its final shape. During this process the surface becomes smooth again and the motif soft and blurred.

I was taken aback by how well it turned out. The form was gratifyingly large and glowed with the blueness I had hoped for, while the encircling line looked much like an evaporating vapour trail. Thinking about it during the making I was also pleased to note a nice equivalence of process in the way my line on the cold glass melted and began to disappear, just as vapour trails do as they warm up. But that was really all there was to celebrate and I began to worry.



*fig. 19. 'Vapour Trail' 2011, blown glass, 11" x 11"*

In Tim Ingold's book on *Lines*<sup>167</sup> he proposes a taxonomy that differentiates between types of line on the basis of how they come about. He distinguishes between *threads* that are fashioned, *traces* that are left and *cuts, cracks* and *creases* that occur through division or folding of surfaces. He singles out the vapour trail as a misfit, an additive trace that appears to be a thread because it is not inscribed on a solid surface. It is, he says, a line that 'wiggles free' of classification.

As I pondered my disquiet about the vessel, I realised that this hybrid status is indeed the crucial thing. Criss-crossing vapour trails produce sky weavings on a scale so preposterously large that seeing them can make one's stomach drop and everything else feel small. And what gives them this power is their *apparent* intentionality, their spuriously synthetic quality, as if threaded by giants. Of course they are not deliberate, but neither are they arbitrary. As an incidental by-product of carefully managed flight paths, the recurring patterns do make sense. In fact they are so familiar to us that it is disorientating when they disappear.<sup>168</sup>

Considered in these terms, my own line was quite wrong, a travesty of what it represented. Made on purpose, cut in a solid surface, reductive not additive, static, permanent, continuous and non-recurring, it neither embodied nor conveyed any of the ambiguous intelligibility I have just described. Instead, it merely imitated.

Another problem with my vessel was its shiny reflectiveness, which obviously undermined the illusion of open sky.<sup>169</sup> But visual mimesis in any case now seemed a dubious goal. Casting about for what to do next, I thought the reflectiveness could perhaps be exploited to accommodate some other aspects of the vignette. A freedom of the essay is that it allows, even encourages, its practitioners to be 'ludic',<sup>170</sup> playful, not too serious. Gingerly, fearful of being merely *ludicrous*, I

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<sup>167</sup> Tim Ingold, 2007, p. 50.

<sup>168</sup> As was strikingly noticeable in 2010, when all planes were grounded for two weeks after the eruption of the *Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland*.

<sup>169</sup> My first thought was to remove the shine by sandblasting the surface, so I tried this out on a second test piece but it destroyed the translucency, turning the thing into a thoroughly earth-bound blob.

<sup>170</sup> Sheringham, p. 92.



decided to try this out. I placed the vessel next to my bed where it would reflect the window and the sky, reasoning that as we lay there in the early mornings, both it and I would be reflecting (on) the same things in our different ways. Having it there beside me did engage my thoughts a little (when I remembered to do my part of the reflecting), but nothing more. Even had it felt profound, the experience was private and un-shareable. I considered photographing the whole set up and presenting the piece alongside the photos. But that seemed gimmicky and unlikely to make sense without accompanying textual explanation.

I realized only some time later that both the particular blueness and the idea of white inscription on it had been seeded in my mind by an elegant postcard by Richard Long that I had picked up somewhere and pinned up on a wall. (fig. 20)

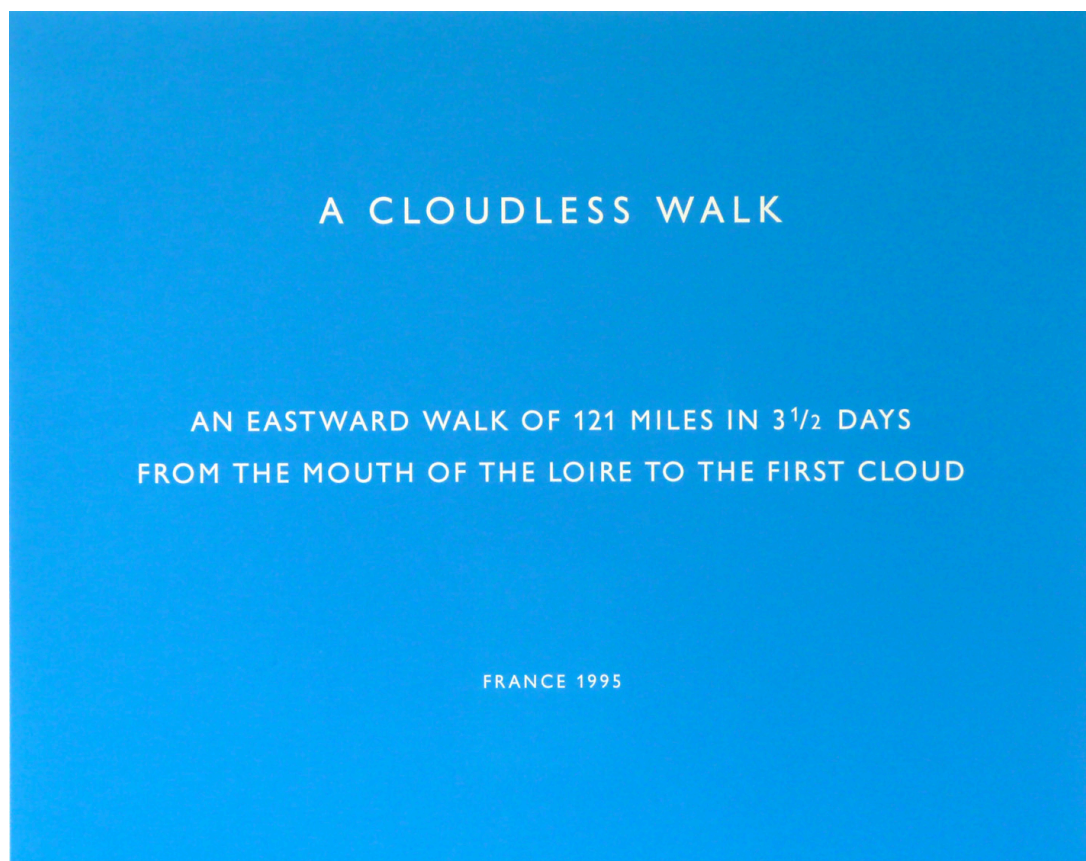


fig. 20. Richard Long, 'A Cloudless Walk' 1996, silkscreen, 50 x 40cm<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Source of image: <https://peterfoolen.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/richard-long-cloudless-walk.html> © Richard Long

This image has a lightness, wit and immateriality - just the kind of qualities I was after - and it was the memory of those that had in part prompted my enthusiasm. Unfortunately, though, I had mis-recalled the cues and landed up with something much more dull.

I subsequently toyed with various ways to construct a different, more dynamic piece that would address the phenomena of adjacency and recurrence that now seemed critical features of the vignette. But the harder I tried the more it felt like analysing an exam question, picking apart and trying to deal with each element of the topic separately. That was definitely not what I wanted to be doing, so I gave up.

### **Reflections on the process**

Given my explicit intention to treat glass as an agent not an object, it felt perverse to have started out right back at the core of Harrington's 'expanded field' blowing a conventional vessel that embodied everything I had sworn to escape. I put it on the shelf above my workspace in the studio and its bright and striking presence there served a certain purpose, providing confirmatory evidence that I belonged in the glass department and was no fraud. But it was also a timely and forceful reminder of my argument with studio glass, the way it draws attention to itself and to its formal strengths and faults, rather than to the ideas that lie behind it.

With that early reversion out of my system, the way was cleared, I hoped, to proceed with the wider approach I had in mind.

## *Two cycling and passing*

I was not yet ready to detach myself from the vignettes and embark on new excursions, but this second essay loosened the ties. The first had highlighted the limitations of visual mimicry. This time I planned to aim for something more expressive, presenting not the look but the *feel* of a place.

### **How it happened**

I had bought a bicycle as a means of getting to and from the train to Dorset to blow glass. After years of crowded bus and tube commuting, going everywhere by bike was hugely liberating. It provided both a whole new skill set and a quite different experience of place. This shows up in two of the vignettes:

*Crossing Waterloo Bridge by bike each winter evening, at around 8pm. Beaching safely at the northern end on the thin spit of white-striped tarmac that opens up between the bus and vehicle lanes. Poised in the space between the two. Fragile, protected not by strength, speed, helmet or other armour, just luminous yellow netting and my own and other drivers' care. The whole encounter intensified by the dark and wet, squeezing and hustling along the skimpy narrows that everyone has to share during tedious weeks of major resurfacing work.*

*On my bike again, leaning into the pleasure of a calculated arc around a familiar corner. Swooping towards a place on the road where currently there is a car but where, by the time I reach it, I know there will be a space. The unchoreographed arabesques, speeding, slowing, entwining and enforced stops and starts of all the different road users, characterized almost always, excepting in catastrophes, by passing and missing, untouched. These gracious dances, viscerally familiar to everyone who participates in them, show up as flares of trailing light in time-lapse photos. But, otherwise, they are rarely noted or remarked.*

These close encounters at dawn and dusk were comparable in many ways to the processes of glassblowing that occupied my days. Both activities are risky and

exhilarating and in both cases physical protection is minimal. They depend on split second judgments about balance, gravity and timing, tacit awareness of what will happen next and cooperation with other people who understand the situation equally well.

Given these similarities it might have seemed obvious to approach the cycling experience through more hot glass. But the analogy was one of process - between the moment and the making - not with what the latter might produce.<sup>172</sup> I was well aware of the disappointing contrast between the glowing, steaming, untouchable glass one puts away to anneal in the *lehr*<sup>173</sup> and the small, cold, set, thing that emerges the next day, which is as poor a record of what has gone before as hardened lava is of a volcano. Besides that, the recent outing with the blue glass had metaphorically burnt my fingers and I hoped not to burn them again.

Instead, I had the idea of using neon tubes. Neon is dramatic and striking, more concerned with light than glass. The latter, of course, provides the form but it is not visible in itself and that felt like an advance. Moreover, the three-dimensional imagery of a neon piece is contingent on the viewing position. Like Alexander Calder's wire figures,<sup>174</sup> it loses meaning if seen from another perspective, which seemed appropriate for making something that had to do with multiple road users' perceptions.

I began with a straightforward outline of a swooping cyclist, but my original drawing had to be simplified to accommodate the technical constraints of bending hot glass tubes. Even then and with expert assistance,<sup>175</sup> it was pretty challenging to make. I ended up with something like a flying ampersand with a slightly 'flat' front tyre. I also made a plain red rectangle to stand for the idea of a bus. (fig. 21)

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<sup>172</sup> I have since realized that I could have gone down a quite different route with this, by exploiting the performative aspects of glassblowing rather than making finished pieces. But at the time I had not yet come across anyone who worked in that way and the idea did not occur to me.

<sup>173</sup> A *lehr* is an oven in which hot glass is placed to cool very slowly, under highly controlled conditions, to remove or minimize the stress in the glass, which would otherwise cause it to crack.

<sup>174</sup> Barbara Zabel, *Calder's Portraits: A New Language*, National Portrait Gallery exhibition catalogue (The Smithsonian Research Press, 2011).

<sup>175</sup> From staff at the Neon Workshop in Wakefield.



*fig. 21. 'Neon Cyclist and Bus' 2012, glass tubes with neon and argon gas, 24" x 15"*

This venture into neon was an instant object lesson in the power of a medium to affect the message. The characteristic cultural 'signature' of neon - its sprightly cartoon styling - is very beguiling, and there's a strong temptation to be witty. Which is fine and enjoyable, but was not helpful for the sense of contingent hazard



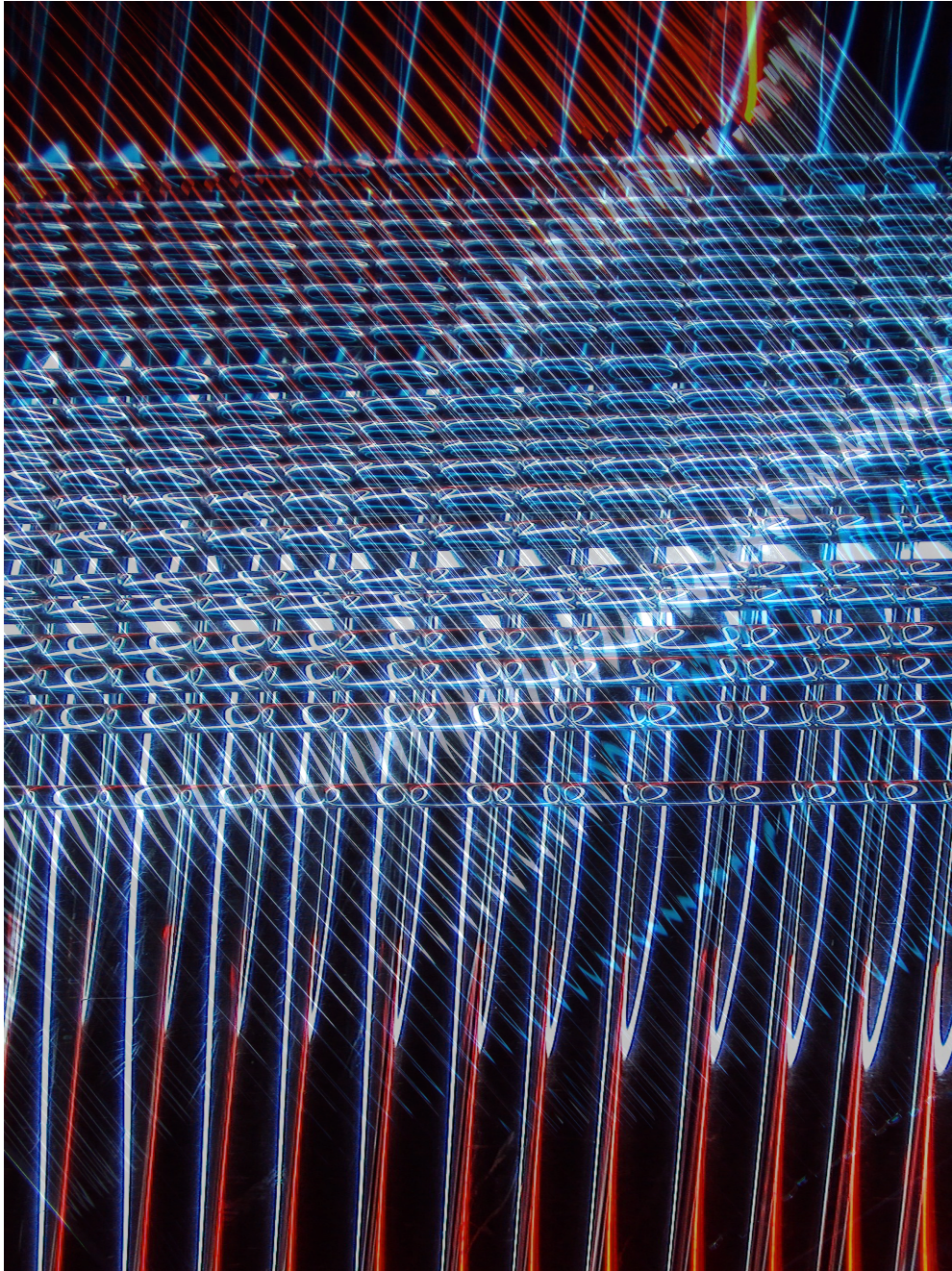
that I had in mind to capture. So once the pieces were made the first imperative was to undermine those references by making the whole thing harder to 'read'.

My first attempt to break up the image involved knitting a jacket for the cyclist from luminous yellow mohair, but any softening effect this might have had was eclipsed by the brightness of the light. Looking for other possibilities, I found a clutch of pulled glass rods and a stack of Perspex boxes. Piling these up together with the neon produced a muddled heap of stuff with trailing wires. But when this was photographed the images were more interesting, especially those that focused in on details rather than encompassing the whole. (figs. 22 and 23)



*fig. 22. 'Neon Cyclist' reflected in a pile of Perspex boxes (detail)*





*fig. 23. 'Neon Cyclist and Bus' seen through a layer of pulled glass rods (detail)*

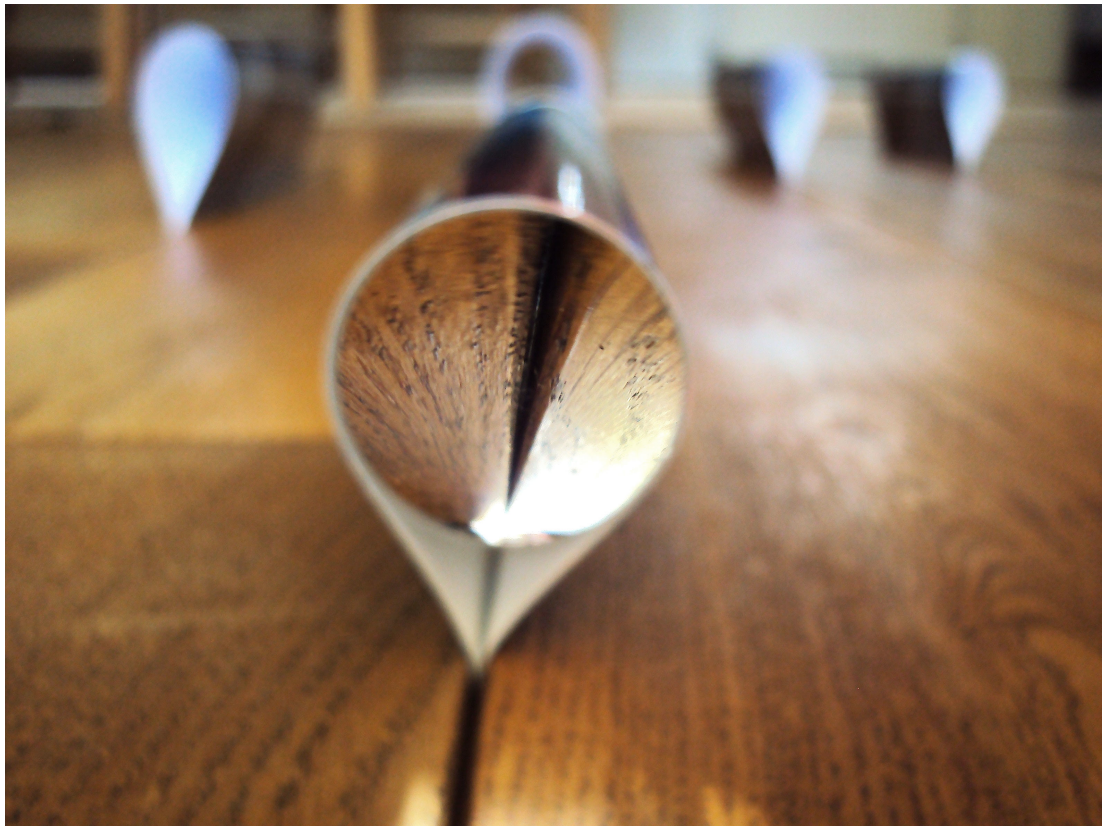
Immediately, some potential advantages of using photos became apparent. This project is about textures that are unbounded in space or time, but any physical representation of those will inevitably be finite. Using a camera to impose a frame both conceals the edges and helps to suggest (much as the *New Topographics* images did) that whatever is shown is merely a sample of ongoing phenomena rather than any kind of definitive or special case. A camera can also create helpful



ambiguity, making it harder visually to disentangle the component elements and work out what is going on.

In this case, though, the camera did something else as well. The photos were taken with standard daylight settings, but what they most resembled were nighttime time-lapse images. In escaping from one set of unwanted associations, I had inadvertently run up against another. By roundabout means it seemed I was coming perilously close to recreating just the kind of clichéd vision of city streets I hoped to avoid.

I continued experimenting with the photos: tiling them into repeating patterns, folding and rolling them up, jamming them into cracks between the floorboards to create a sense of equipoise and incorporating some commercially made lenses. (fig. 24)



*fig. 24. Rolled 'Neon Cyclist and Bus' photographs with glass lens*

On the floor with my materials, playing with juxtapositions of clarity and blur, I almost became Adorno's 'thinker [who] does not think'. But the cost of such nose-following exploration was ultimately a loss of focus on the underlying purpose, so I stopped short to collect my thoughts.

### **Reflections on the process**

I was excited about the photographs and the new possibilities for the project they revealed. But these ideas were something to explore on another occasion, since this particular essay had stalled. And that, I decided, was partly because it was based on a faulty premise.

The project is concerned with aspects of place that are accessible through direct sensory experience. In the planning stages I had thought a lot about what that meant. But since then, apparently, I had forgotten. The vignettes were notes about textures of place, made in full awareness at the time that the transposition into words was unsatisfactory. My attempts (in this and the previous essay) to back translate these texts to textures in a different mode were, if anything, compounding the problem, creating two degrees of separation from the experienced events. So, rather than pushing on in that direction I resolved to get back to the original plan. I would set out on my feet to attend to places directly, seeking ways to capture and hold onto their happenings in actual space and time.

### *Three traffic junction*

Working on an idea one already has in mind is a quite different matter from looking for something new. The vignettes had provided readymade subject matter, but from now on I intended to start from scratch. Feeling as hopeful and uncertain as a new prospector setting out to pan for gold I decided on a site and began my exploration. Like other such prospectors, I soon learned that discoveries are not made to order and depend on many other factors besides trying hard.

#### **How it happened**

'Places', Nigel Thrift observes, 'are 'passings' that 'haunt' us; and we haunt them'.<sup>176</sup> For this essay I chose an actual passing place, a traffic junction where five roads converge. It was somewhere I went all the time, which felt deeply familiar. Over years of passing through in many different circumstances I had been a tacit witness of its changing moods, as indeed it had of mine. I was aware and appreciative of its considerable complexity, but I had not previously seen it as a subject for deliberate contemplation.

My initial approach had echoes of both the Boyle Family and Perec. I spent a fortnight examining the junction in all ways I could think of, entering, leaving and circumnavigating it, watching from the edges, mapping, anatomising, counting, listing, identifying sequences and making cross-sectional drawings. (fig. 25) I was going on the principle, cited earlier, that as we work to know a thing 'up and down, in and out, through and through', it becomes translucent, enabling us to see right through it.<sup>177</sup> On this occasion, though, that did not happen. Instead, my efforts generated a mound of data that simply cluttered up the view. As I systematically catalogued its contents and events, the hope of a fresh take on the over-arching,

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<sup>176</sup> Nigel Thrift, 'Steps to an Ecology of Place', in *Human Geography Today*, ed. by Doreen Massey, John Allen and Phil Sarre (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) pp. 295-323, (p. 310).

<sup>177</sup> Thomson, quoted in Ingold, 2007.

on-going textures of the junction shrank away. And I was still transmuting everything into words, rather than engaging directly with what I felt and saw.

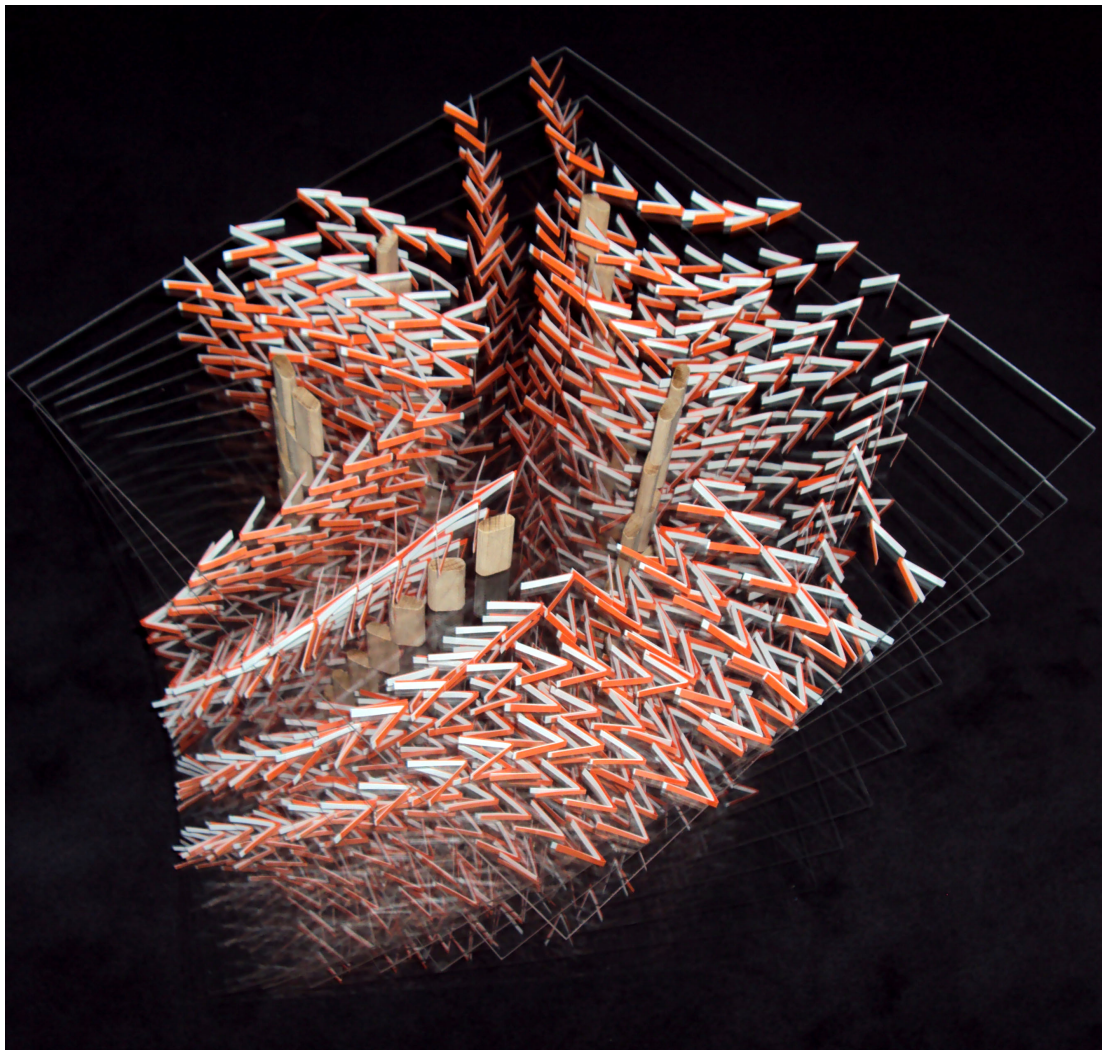
<b>What happens there</b>
<b>Cycles of light</b>
... green/orange/red ... changing in series
red receding/shrinking, white oncoming/growing
red intensified with brakes
yellow blinking
white flashing
occasional blue flashing, moving fast
<b>Cycles of movement (on wheels and feet)</b>
...going, slowing, stopping, waiting (pausing), starting, speeding...
<b>Relationships of movement</b>
...in front, behind, beside, between, passing, weaving, straight, bending
...alone, in pairs, threes, groups
<b>Trajectories of movement</b>
...entering, traversing, leaving
...crossing, circumnavigating, dipping out and back in
<b>Environmental rhythms</b>
... times of day, week, year
... light/dark, hot/cold, windy/still, wet/dry
<b>Cycles of activity</b>
...empty/filling/crowded/emptying
...predominant direction of flow - from the south/to the south
<b>Exceptional events that alter all the other patterns</b>
...emergency vehicles, accidents, marches, road works, building works

What is there			
top/centre	side	fundamentals	periphery
space	space	space	space
space	space	horizon	roof tops
space	tree tops	facades	building interiors
space	lamp posts	facades	building interiors
Bus top decks	traffic lights	names/labels	building interiors
passengers sit			
cars, bikes, vans, bus	pedestrians	doors/windows	shop/café interiors
bottom decks	buggies	customers	customers sit in
drivers	luggage	look through	peruse, buy, etc.
passengers	stand, walk, pull	get through	+ stuff, look round
road	pavement	doorsteps	floors
hard core	hard core, cellars	foundations	basements
cables/drains	cables/drains	foundations	foundations
gravel	gravel	gravel	gravel
bottom/centre			periphery

fig. 25. Examples of categorical fragmentation



I stopped writing lists and constructed a physical model, concentrating on directions of travel and ignoring everything else. With 1300 paper chevrons (white for headlights, red for taillights) I mapped the recurring trails of traffic flowing through the junction on a tower of Perspex sheets. (figs. 26 and 27)



*fig. 26. 'Traffic Flows' 2012, red and white card, Perspex sheet, wooden spacers, 24" x 20" x 20"*

The model was topographically accurate except at the centre, where I left a gap. Like the eye of a cyclone, the middle spot of the junction is a place of surprising calm. Although several routes cross it, nothing moves at speed and each time the pedestrian crossing lights turn green it empties of all traffic.





*fig 27. 'Traffic Flows' (detail)*

It felt like progress to be representing not what a place looks or feels like (as in the previous essays) but rather how it functions, and the model was convincingly dynamic. But it was also so abstract that nobody would recognise its provenance

without explanation, and that would mean resorting to language again, which I was trying to avoid.

I considered making an immersive, room-sized version of the model, with the layers of paper arrows replaced by suspended chains of red/white glass, so that viewers might jaywalk dangerously in among the lines. But producing so many glass pieces would be an enormous undertaking. In the context of the project it seemed inappropriate to invest so much time and resources in realising a single idea and I was wary of making too much of it with an overly grand statement. So I moved on to a different line of thought.

From the bird's eye view of the model everything makes sense, but at pavement level it is often impossible to see across the junction and the flows of traffic do not seem orderly at all. As respite from trying too hard to see, I decided to embrace that blindness. Working in more expressive mode I made some fused glass strips to match the colour palette of the junction and wove them together with strips of torn black paper. The results felt promising, especially when photographed (for the reasons discussed in essay 2). I folded the photos into a five-sided lantern with an implied but inaccessible interior space. (fig. 28) As I thought of it in relation to this thesis, it was like a black diamond packed with graphite inclusions,<sup>178</sup> whose facets reflect a fundamental truth about its character by how tantalisingly little they reveal.

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<sup>178</sup> A black diamond is an impure form of polycrystalline diamond consisting of diamond, graphite and amorphous carbon <<https://www.gemsociety.org/article/black-diamonds/>> [accessed 6 January 2017]





*fig. 28. 'Black Diamond' 2012, folded photographs of fused glass and paper, 9" x 6" x 6" (detail)*

For a long time after that I didn't think about the junction. And then one day while passing through it I found myself again transfixed by the richness of its colours, glowing in the early evening light. Since I had a camera with me I stopped and took some pictures; afterwards, among them, I spotted something else. Part way through one brief video sequence a bus rolls up, turns at an angle across the centre and then stands motionless in the middle of the flow. In the bright interior a woman is sitting, facing forwards, upright and composed. She raises something to her mouth then drops her hand again. (fig. 29) Ten seconds later the bus moves off again and disappears. The images are small and indistinct and the woman's actions arbitrary. What snagged my attention, because it stands out forcibly, was the extent of her detachment and the sense I had that in her head she simply was not there.



fig. 29. 'Woman on a Bus' 2012, video (single frame)

As Kracauer observes, being barely aware of one's surroundings in familiar situations is a normal state:

Intimate faces, streets we walk day by day, the house we live in - all these things are part of us like our skin, and because we know them by heart we do not know them with the eye. Once integrated into our existence, they cease to be objects of perception.<sup>179</sup>

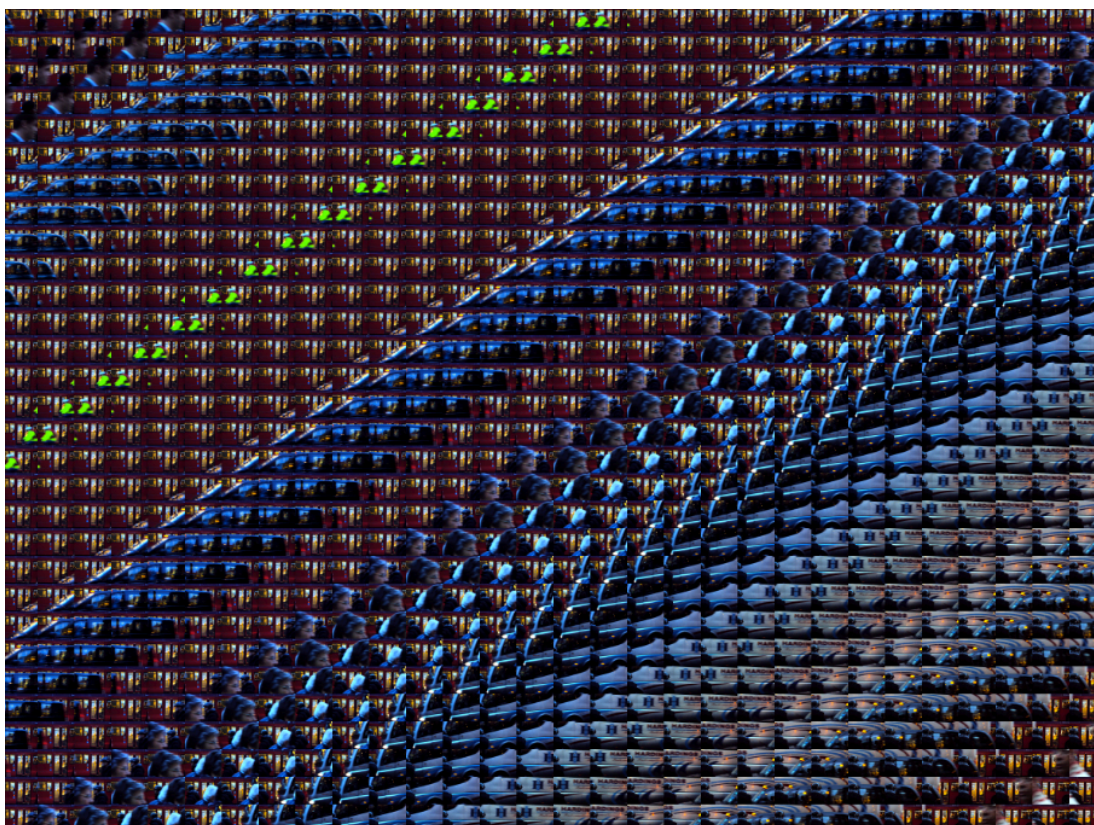
This had been true for me in relation to the junction, until the day I took on studying it. After watching the woman I decided to step backwards and seek a way to encompass the experience of both being in such a striking environment *and* not noticing it at all.<sup>180</sup> I had the scrap of video but it was poor quality, too few frames and not enough pixels to do anything with. I went back with better cameras to

<sup>179</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 55.

<sup>180</sup> As China Mieville does so successfully in his novel *The City and The City*.



attempt to reprise the moment, but though I now knew what I wanted I couldn't find anything that encapsulated it better. So I put this essay on hold again awaiting new ideas. Eventually, months later, I thought of a way to 'blow up' the record of those ten seconds of stasis by selecting every fourth frame from the video, printing multiple copies and combining them in a single image mounted on the wall. (fig. 30)



*fig. 30. 'Ten Seconds Magnified' 2013, multiple photographs, 11' 0" x 7' 6" (time progresses diagonally from top left corner to bottom right corner)*

The result was a revelation of patterned colour like the iridescence on a pheasant's wing. (Appropriately enough, I have since discovered, the cause of naturally occurring iridescence is a phenomenon known as 'thin-film interference'.) But what was most interesting was the divergence of effects on events happening inside and outside the bus. While the woman stayed exactly as she was, impassive and unmoved, the passing traffic (pedestrians, taxis, bikers, and a coach) dissolved and merged into a series of abstract shimmering bands. It was hard to understand quite why this occurred, but as a visual metaphor for the experience I sought to represent, the contrast was surprisingly apt.

### **Reflections on the process**

In my teens I spent a lot of time on dinghies in the narrow cuts and meandering rivers of Norfolk. The winds there are fitful, water depths vary and it is easy to get stuck, either becalmed or run aground. Progress is not a matter of plain sailing but laborious zigzagging against the oncoming wind. For every tack taken that offers fresh momentum you soon run up against another bank and have to stop and go about. It can feel for ages like nothing is happening, since everything looks the same, but then the rounding of a single bend delivers the reward of a staithe with a pub and refreshments or an enticing sheet of open broad. Among the many metaphors for the experience of essaying, marshland sailing does not feature; nevertheless it seems a good fit.

In the course of this essay I tacked about from language to abstraction and from modelling to making to extrapolating from ordinary photographs. Having tended to the view that intangible qualities of place required indecipherable forms of presentation, I completely changed my mind. I realised the advantages of working with recognisable images taken from life, rather than creating entirely new versions of my own. While the first approach invites and enables other people to draw directly on their own experiences of a place, the second asks them to attend to mine. I wanted to do both. It seemed that by tweaking real photos to manage what is shown and seen, I might have found a way.

#### *Four Overground train*

In contrast to the systematic campaign of investigation with which I began the junction essay, I embarked on this one in much less active mode, not so much searching as watchfully waiting, keeping an eye out for whatever might turn up. This time I had my camera with me from the start, but it was in my pocket rather than my hand, as I did not want to be taken over and have it shape the view.

#### **How it happened**

On the London Overground line in 2009 the cranky and neglected rolling stock was replaced by a new generation of walk-through trains.<sup>181</sup> Internally they were both novel and beautiful, providing a vista as long as a ropewalk, an avenue of receding, orange poles that undulated as the carriages snaked and swayed. With those trains, riding on the Overground became a pleasure. I imagine that my fellow passengers appreciated them too, but that was hard to tell.

The tightly packed commuter train has been characterised by the ethnologist Marc Augé as a place of collective ‘solitudes’, where people mainly keep themselves to themselves.<sup>182</sup> Augé’s focus is on the social decorum of such shared journeys, and in his book *In the Metro* this is finely observed. He also reflects on the Metro system itself, its connections, dimensions, memories and meanings, and includes a few photographs of station platforms, but the trains themselves stay curiously invisible, their material and aesthetic qualities unconsidered. Augé, like his passengers (and my woman on the bus), seems either indifferent or oblivious to the spectacular sensory environment of motion and colour in which they are immersed (and which Ted Sonnenschein highlights so strikingly in his work).

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<sup>181</sup> Such trains are now standard right across the London Underground, but the Overground was the first line to introduce them.

<sup>182</sup> Marc Augé, *In the Metro*, trans. by Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Following on from the previous essay, I was keen to pursue this sense of disconnection between the social and physical textures of place and the Overground seemed a good a place to do that. I began by taking ad hoc pictures on my journeys, initially focusing on people's feet to avoid intruding on their faces. But as nobody took any notice I grew bolder, eventually directing my camera at the whole complex entanglement of figures and poles.<sup>183</sup> (fig. 31)



*fig. 31. Passengers on the Overground, 2012*

<sup>183</sup> Taking such photos is legally permitted, since people on public transport are considered to be in a public place. Matt Cooke 'Tube and train commuters caught on camera' 25 August 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-14650757> [accessed 11 January 2017]



Then one day I travelled to the end of the line. When the other passengers got off at the final stop, I stayed on board. With the doors closed and the power turned off the space inside was quiet and absolutely still. I sat on the floor and revelled in it.

Back at home I decided to investigate what is actually visible from one end to the other of an (almost) empty train, by blowing up a small section from the furthest reaches of the sharpest of my photos. Starved of pixels because of the scale, the image was abstractly beautiful, and I decided to do the same with the rest of the photo. The end result was enormous, spreading right across the living room carpet. (fig. 32) It was impractical to leave it there, so I taped the parts together and hung the whole thing on the wall.



*fig. 32. 'Overground Interior' 2012, in construction on the floor*

Over several days of focusing on magnifying the sections I had more or less forgotten about passengers and their perspectives. The train had become a static object, effectively an arrangement of forms. But then my friend came in carrying our cat, and as he stood with his back to the now life-sized photo it all of a sudden came to life. (fig. 33)



*fig. 33. 'Overground Interior' 2012 with friend and cat, multiple photographs, 7' x 5'*

It felt like the moment at the end of the line when everything had sparked back into action, ready to set off again. The cat being there was an obvious anomaly, for a

loose cat on a train is an incongruous sight. But the subtler aspect that caught my attention was the unexpected sense of a portrait, of seeing someone, self-aware, looking out from within that space. The impression was of course deceptive since my friend was not actually on the train but in the room with me. Nevertheless, it made me think. The word portrait comes from the Latin *portrahere*, which translates as 'to drag out, reveal, expose',<sup>184</sup> and, critically, what a portrait reveals is not a person's likeness but their presence.

You get on a train to be bodily transported, so you can get off again somewhere else. Meanwhile, there is little that needs to be done besides managing your boundaries and finding ways to pass the time. As Augé notes, passengers often tacitly ignore one another. They also involute, becoming mentally absented not just from their surroundings but perhaps also temporarily from themselves. The thought that struck me was that this sense of travelling incognito and its associated lack of noticing of the immediate environment could be undermined quite easily by holding up a mirror.

At the time, submissions were being invited for the 2013 RCA Research Biennial Exhibition<sup>185</sup> on the theme of Disruption, so I worked up the idea into a piece for the show. I proposed a reflexive (because reflected) *tableau vivant* whose actors and spectators would be one and the same, observing themselves in place as passengers on a train. (fig. 34) Here is what I wrote about it in anticipation:

This train will be going nowhere. Those who board it will have no travel plans and can disembark whenever they choose. Opportunities to look around will be unconstrained, since frank scrutiny of passengers incorporated in the image will carry neither risk nor promise of further interaction. But because of the mirror, there can be no anonymity. The relationships to be negotiated will be with one's self and anyone else who happens to be standing adjacent in the space.

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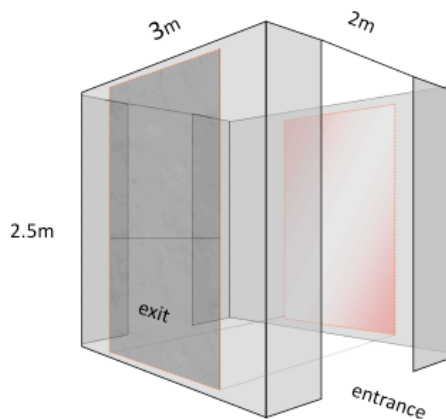
<sup>184</sup> Susan Walker, *Greek and Roman Portraits* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), p. 16.

<sup>185</sup> Catalogue and book available at <<https://cargocollective.com/disruption>>



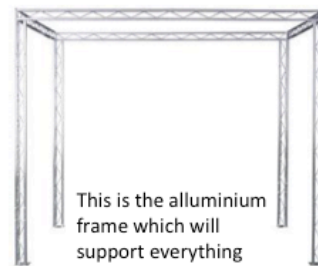
Charlotte Humphrey  
Details of installation

People will be invited to go in the front, pause inside, and exit through the back



The sides of the frame will be covered in stretched white muslin (shown grey on diagram)

The image of the train interior will be suspended on one side, with a large mirror opposite and a low platform across the floor between them



This is the aluminium frame which will support everything including a CCTV type camera and lighting above the entrance (not shown in diagram)



fig. 34. Proposal for 'Overground' 2013, aluminium gantry, aluminium mirror, multiple photographs, muslin sheeting, 3 x 2 x 2.5m



fig. 35. 'Overground' installation in RCA Research Biennial Exhibition 2013, with gallery visitors (the viewers are facing themselves in the mirror)

In the event various visitors to the exhibition paused in this space for quite a while, but I do not know what they saw or thought. (fig. 35) Ironically, I felt shy of asking, not wanting to make myself known. And then a filmmaker making a documentary about the RCA research environment asked to interview me about the piece and I became the unexpected subject of my own experiment, confronting myself in the mirror on the train, explaining my ideas to a stranger and feeling uncomfortably exposed. (fig. 36)



*fig. 36. Overground train essay re-enactment*

### **Reflections on the process**

After the strenuous tacking of the previous essay, this one was much less effortful, more like drifting with a favourable current, a combination of letting things take their course and luck that good things happened. (Luck, for example, that the sun's angle at Richmond station so finely illuminated the whole length of the train.) But as the scientist Louis Pasteur famously observed, 'in the fields of observation

chance favours only the prepared mind'.<sup>186</sup> It was chance that my friend came in when he did, but I was already primed by thinking about travellers to recognise his demeanour as being matter out of place.

Using a mirror to provoke its viewer to reflect on their own position in the world is something that has certainly been done before, both in art and literature. In her book *Mirror Affect* Cristina Albu discusses a wide range of recent work of that kind.<sup>187</sup> She focuses on how mirroring and reflection are used to heighten viewers' awareness of the social and spatial contexts of the aesthetic experience (as in Walead Beshty's *Mirrored Floor*, which I discussed in Chapter 3). In contrast, my aim was to divert viewers away from spectatorship, to reflect on their ordinary experience of being on a train. The idea of doing that might not have come to me had I still been narrowly focused on *making* work in glass. The mirror was in fact a piece of polished aluminium, since that was lighter, safer and easier to suspend. This was thus the first of these essays in which glass as a substantive material did not feature at all.

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<sup>186</sup> Louis Pasteur, lecture given at the University of Lille, 7 December 1854.

<sup>187</sup> Cristina Albu, *Mirror Affect: Seeing Self, Observing Others in Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).



## *Five kitchen shelves*

In relation to the explorations undertaken for this project, the kitchen was my base camp, providing rest and recuperation from my sallies out elsewhere. It was a place for collecting my thoughts about other places, not somewhere I had considered as a focus for attention in its own right. So this next essay, when it started, took me by surprise.

### **How it happened**

In our Victorian terraced house the kitchen occupies what used to be the living room, with a marble fireplace beneath a gilt-framed mirror. The recesses on either side have open shelves originally meant for books. These now hold things to do with cooking and other accumulated odds and ends.

I began taking pictures of the shelves because I had bought a new camera. Having unpacked it on the kitchen table I wanted to test it out, and they were the nearest subject matter to hand. So I took a few close up photos and printed them. (fig. 37) Then some larger sections of the wall from further away. I planned to blow up and print the same sections as the close ups and compare the technical quality of the images.



*fig. 37. One kitchen shelf, 2013*

Despite using and touching them all the time I had never before had reason to study the shelves directly. But when I saw the photos I found them riveting. Isolated from the mundane context and framed as on a stage, the piled dishcloths, stacks of tea lights and jars of flour, sugar and rice had a stature and intensity reminiscent of Giorgio Morandi, whose etchings and drawings I had seen on show a few weeks earlier. (fig. 38) In a review of that exhibition the critic Laura Cumming writes:

All his objects have presence. A fantastic convocation of pitchers meets in cabal. Two with their backs against us are hugger-mugger with a third, like tall prelates. A lowly dish, half their height, waits upon their bidding and a bottle that is not part of the secret society cranes its neck to hear. Brilliant white streaks of light shoot down the back-turned pitchers, representing glaze but positively aggressive in their glint. One fears for the bottle.<sup>188</sup>



fig. 38. Giorgio Morandi, 'Still Life with Five Objects' 1956, etching 381 x 469mm  
Photo: Galleria d'Arte Maggiore GAM, Bologna

<sup>188</sup> Laura Cumming, 'Morandi: Lines of Poetry – review', *The Guardian*, 13 January 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/13/morandi-lines-poetry-review-giorgio>> [accessed 15 May 2013]



Morandi's still lives are very carefully orchestrated: 'It takes me weeks to make up my mind which group of bottles will go well with a particular coloured tablecloth [...] Then it takes me weeks of thinking about the bottles themselves, and yet often I still go wrong with the spaces. Perhaps I work too fast?'<sup>189</sup> The images I so casually snapped had the poise of still life too, and yet this was entirely uncontrived. For while I am certainly partially responsible for acquiring and arranging the items on the shelves, I do this almost by rote. Buying provisions and putting them away is simply what happens in the kitchen. The loosely recurring patterns of acquisition, depletion and replacement are part of the everyday occurrences of ordinary life that Georges Perec calls 'the infra-ordinary'.<sup>190</sup> Usually they are completely overlooked. Now, as I pondered on the contrasts with Morandi, I found my interest caught. I wondered what might be done with the photos to shake off their composure and instead draw attention to the unsettled and contingent status of their contents.

I had started with just a few shelves, but it felt arbitrary to neglect the rest so I photographed them all, resisting the temptation to edit or rearrange anything, though I felt self-conscious in a way I had not done initially about what they revealed of how we live. And then I laid out all the prints in one big rectangle, according to their positions on the wall. (fig. 39) The match was not perfect, because there are more shelves in some columns than in others, so I had to leave out a couple.

The ornate mirror above the mantelpiece is a conventional piece of furniture, hung there for decorative purposes. Unlike the unexpected mirror in my Overground installation, it is not designed to subvert. Its function is an abstract one, to enhance space, light and movement, not to reflect substantive happenings in the room, though of course it does that too. Living with such a mirror, one easily pays it no

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<sup>189</sup> Giorgio Morandi quoted in John MacTaggart, 'Giorgio Morandi – Natura Morta' <[www.artyfactory.com/art\\_appreciation/still\\_life/giorgio\\_morandi.htm](http://www.artyfactory.com/art_appreciation/still_life/giorgio_morandi.htm)> [accessed 18 May 2013]

<sup>190</sup> Georges Perec, 'Approaches to what?' in *The Everyday Life Reader* ed. by Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002) p.177-178. (originally published 1973)

attention, for it shows up nothing that can't already be seen. I decided to unscrew the mirror and put my rectangle up instead, as a kind of portrait *in* the kitchen *of* the kitchen. (fig. 40) This different form of visual doubling seemed a way to acknowledge the qualities of the shelves, above and beyond their practical uses.

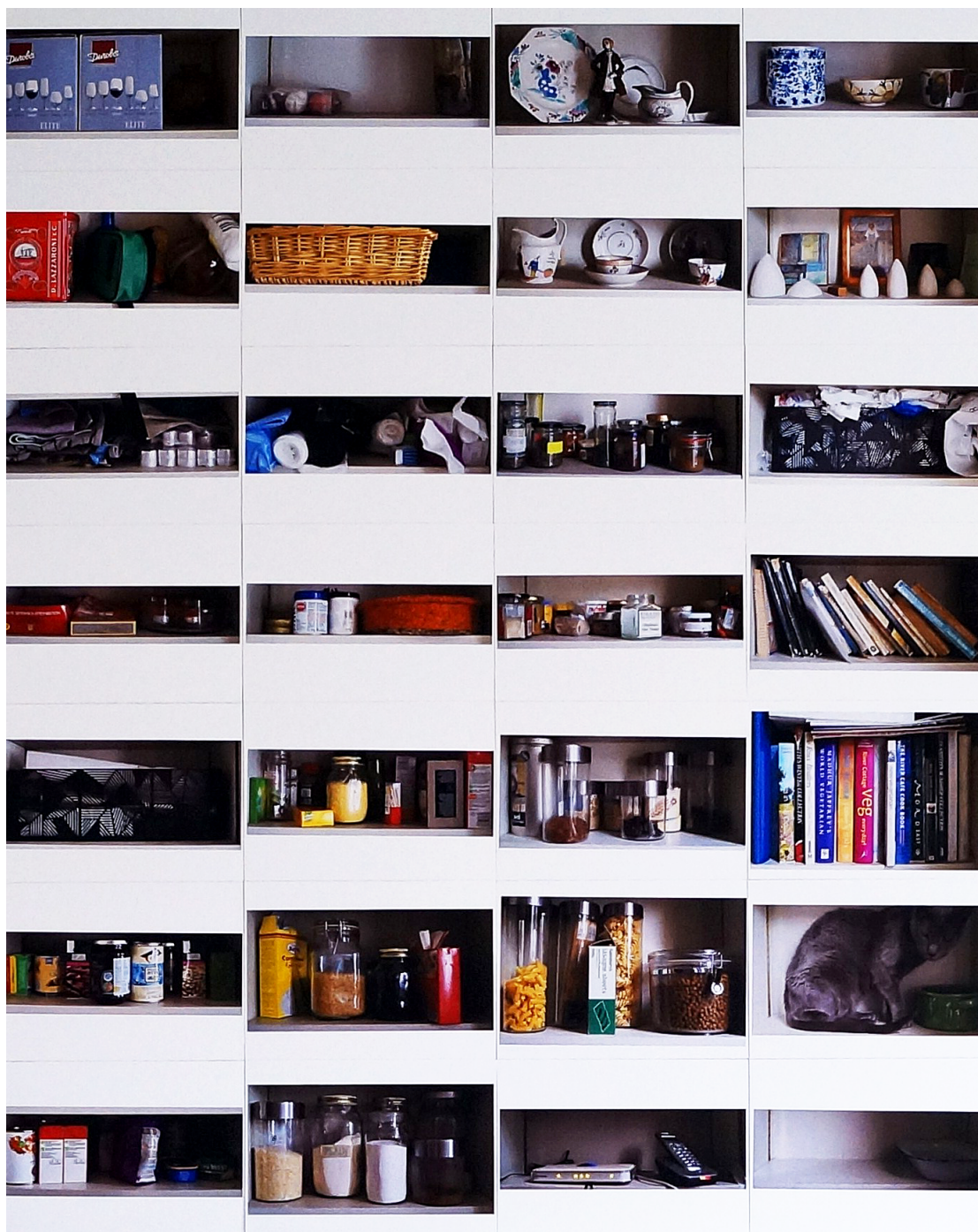


fig. 39. 'Kitchen Shelf Portrait' 2013, multiple photographs, 5' x 4'

Up until that point the photos had drawn attention to the objects in them and their physical relationships - what Sheringham describes as a 'first-level everyday that can be accessed by the eye'.<sup>191</sup> But placing the 'portrait' on the wall changed that completely. It instantly 'went live'. I found myself no longer focusing on the photos, but glancing back and forth from images to shelves, musing not on what was there but what had gone awry. For even in the brief time since taking the photos some minor changes had occurred and more continued to unspool each day as the contents of the actual shelves emptied, altered and were refilled (some more speedily than others).



fig. 40. 'Kitchen Shelf Portrait' in the kitchen

It seemed I had stumbled on a means to access that elusive quality which Blanchot describes as 'perpetual becoming'.<sup>192</sup> My hunch that I was onto something was confirmed by observing how the wall now snagged the attention of everyone who came into the kitchen. One person quietly set about rearranging the shelves to as

<sup>191</sup> Sheringham, p.42.

<sup>192</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, Trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.243.



near as possible match the photographs. Three small children sat transfixed, treating the wall as a mega-sized 'spot the difference' puzzle. Our next door neighbour mused on the contrast with her own minimalist kitchen on the other side of the wall, where everything is concealed in cupboards and the only sign of passing time is the cycle of fresh and fading flowers in a vase.

I wanted a portable record that I could discuss with others elsewhere, so a week later I re-photographed the whole wall, including both real shelves and images, and printed it up in sections as an almost life-sized facsimile. The new image was disappointing, for by bookmarking a specific period of change between two points in time it reverted to a static record, a trace. Removing it from the environment of the kitchen destroyed the scope for responsive interaction, since it was no longer possible for anyone to interfere with the actual shelves. And, in an odd way, it became a much more personal portrait of our household - less how things happen in *a* kitchen, more how we live in *ours* - as I realized when I showed it to someone who had not been to the house. The fact that we mix up our living and cooking spaces to such an extent was, to her, so curious that she noticed little else.

Back at home, once the photos had been on the wall for a month or so the fizz went out of them, reviving only temporarily when someone new turned up. It was a reminder of how quickly new things normalize, so that what has been fresh and provocative becomes itself a dusty fixture. And yet in quieter ways their influence persists. As I write, they have been up for three years. When the kitchen needed painting the photos set the tone - we kept the same colour so the shelves would not need to change. I have become bolder about tidying and reorganizing them, but each time I do so I am aware of the connections becoming more obscure. Particularly since our cat died, his continuing presence on the wall stands out as anomalous. And yet there are still a few shelves, high up and hard to reach, whose contents have not changed at all; I find myself querying their purpose, and wondering whether I should deliberately clear them out.

## Reflections on the process

High fidelity television, low iron glass<sup>193</sup> and 48 frames-per-second films all have disquieting effects on perception, especially when seen for the first time. The more than normal clarity they provide makes the world seem hyper-real, without it being quite apparent why. Looking back now on how this essay came about, I think something like that happened here. At the time I focused on the content and framing of the photos, but perhaps it was in fact their technical quality - the heightened transparency of a better camera - that unwittingly caught my eye. And yet in the end what made the crucial difference was nothing internal or intrinsic to the images but rather the act of juxtaposition, the showing indirectly, the provocation to look away and check. In Chapter 4 I wrote of the need to identify the critical angle when cutting a facet to reveal the interior qualities of a stone. In the previous essays I searched for ways to find that angle by intervening in how a place is experienced or perceived conceptually. This was the first one that depended instead on physically diverting the gaze.

This was the most wayward of the essays thus far. It came out of nowhere and began without my noticing. While glass played a part in helping things along, the ways this happened almost seem perverse - first in the conventional form of a superior lens and then as a mirror that I removed. But despite being so unexpected it took me further than the others had done by adding a longer view, a reminder of the ways that textures of place are not merely the stuff of happenings in the moment but also emergent over a much longer term.

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<sup>193</sup> Low iron glass is made from low-iron silica sand. It has a ferric oxide content of about 0.01%, which is 10 times less than the float glass that is usually used in windows. It has higher light transmission (transmitting 91% of light, compared to 83% for ordinary glass) and is strikingly colourless, being without the usual greenish tinge.

## *Six forest floor*

Over the course of the preceding essays, glass as a material had featured less and less and in the open-ended explorations I was carrying on alongside, the same thing happened. I went from making glass to photographing it to photographing glass-like stuff (thread and wire) to photographing other things entirely. I did not see this as a problem for the project, for I was confident that my work was still informed by a broad 'glass sensibility'.<sup>194</sup> Nevertheless, as a maker, I missed handling glass. So when I heard about a summer workshop in the United States focusing on the dynamic properties of hot glass, I applied to join.<sup>195</sup> This essay was prompted by participating in that workshop, rather than by thoughts about the place itself.

### **How it happened**

In the class we tested glass to destruction in many different ways, pouring, spilling and stretching it into gossamer-fine strands. We made bangs, flashes and explosions and a great deal of mess. It was all about dramatic processes, not enduring end results. But along the way we encountered a technique for blowing ultra-thin bubbles that was, for me, a revelation.<sup>196</sup> The only substantial feature of these bubbles was their impressive size. Otherwise, they were best described in terms of what they lacked, being nearly invisible, almost weightless, with no predictable or describable shape. They required little time or skill to make and were impossible to keep because they were so fragile. This was glass unlike any I had ever

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<sup>194</sup> When I first came up with the term 'glass sensibility' at around this stage in the project I could not easily explain what it meant. Subsequently I worked that out, and it is discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>195</sup> The 10-day class, entitled *Visualising invisibility*, was led by the US-based Korean artist Bohyun Yoon and took place at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle in Maine.

<sup>196</sup> Usually when glass is blown by mouth, the initial blob of molten glass is stabilized and a tiny bubble introduced. It is then re-heated and blown up incrementally in carefully controlled conditions. To make these bubbles a gather of glass straight from the furnace is expanded almost to bursting point in the course of a few seconds, using a continuous blast of compressed air attached to the blowpipe. Often it bursts immediately. If not, it can be knocked off the pipe and cooled without annealing, but it has no long-term viability, remaining liable to shatter or collapse at any time. The glass is flexible like plastic; it can be dented with a finger and then springs back.

seen, carrying with it none of the baggage I had found so difficult before. I was sure I could use it somehow for this project. So I set about doing so, there and then.

But I realised I was facing a new kind of challenge, for while the bubbles might be inconspicuous and unassertive, the place we were making them certainly was not. (fig. 41) Set in 40 acres of ancient maritime fog forest on an island off the coast of Maine, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts is a privileged place that takes itself extremely seriously. It is both culturally and physically exceptional, precious in both senses of the word.<sup>197</sup> The whole point of attending a workshop there is to have and take the time to reflect and be reflexive. Everything is seen as special, potentially to be celebrated; nothing just happens in a casual way. And the setting is spectacular:

Huge boulders draped and dotted with thick green mossy pillows and great blankets of grey lichen. A softly bouncing ground comprised of endless spruce pine felted discard. Little grottos and deep brown pools fringed with the brightest green and a whole impassable bog of emerald sponge. And that's just the ground. Then there are the silver tree trunks, sun and shadow, shore and ocean. Each square inch downward and square mile outwards contains a wealth of visual pleasure and ecological magnificence.<sup>198</sup>

Haystack is a world away from the 'ordinary' places that had been the focus of my other essays and from those chosen, with good reason, by the artists whose work I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The challenge was how to accommodate its brilliance without being overwhelmed, without resorting to the clichés and hyperbole that seemed, in fact, to fit it rather well.

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<sup>197</sup> The Haystack campus is a protected site that is included in the US Government's National Record of Historic Places.

<sup>198</sup> Extract from the notes I wrote on the day that I arrived.



*fig. 41. Haystack view, 2013*

There is a looped trail running through the forest at Haystack that workshop participants are free to use, but stepping off the path is discouraged for fear of damaging the delicate eco-system. I set off with a thin bubble in my arms to see where it would take me. The glass determined not just where I went but also how, for the breeze coming off the ocean made the bubble flutter and fragments of it blew away. In order to protect it I frequently walked backwards, going slowly over the tree roots, watching the ground. I wandered for two days, taking pictures. Along the way the glass deteriorated, new holes appearing each time I put it down. Eventually in the car park it fell apart, so I set the biggest remnant down on the grit and took a last photo. Seconds later it collapsed, in a shower of sparkles that I ground into the dust.

In the photos, the bubble gained character. (fig. 42) Chameleon-like, it adapted to context. Under a boulder it seemed tiny and fragile, on the path like a sleeping chick



in a nest. On a post in the car park it echoed the expansive curves of a classic Chevrolet. This was interesting, if not what I had in mind.



*fig. 42. 'Posed Bubble' 2013, photographs of blown glass, 22" x 15"*

But the final image I had taken was different. (fig. 43) By that point the neck of the bubble was all that remained. In the photo the glass itself is barely visible, yet the shadow it casts is remarkably strong. It suggests a broken vessel, and a lovely one at that, in form a bit like an Etruscan vase. Examining it carefully, I saw on the ground the trace of a tyre and the lightest print of a rubber-soled shoe. The unexpected juxtaposition encapsulated the intensity of Haystack better than I could have hoped. What I had produced in this rarefied environment was almost nothing, but it had a subtle quality that was powerful enough to take the dullest bit of ground with the most mundane purpose and transform it into something entrancing that held my gaze.



fig. 43. 'Shadow of the Bubble' 2013, photograph of blown glass fragment 13" x 7"

Emboldened by success, I decided to try for more. I continued walking the trail, though now without a bubble, whenever there was nothing else going on. The forbidden terrain on either side was like an I-Spy book for children with every sort of toadstool, shapely pinecones, neat entrances to chipmunks' burrows, pincushion mosses and so on. But the charming catalogue was problematic. When I first attempted to get to grips with the traffic junction, I acquired too many facts. Here, it seemed the underlying texture of the forest was obscured by the plethora of things. In *The Man Without Qualities* Robert Musil's protagonist muses thus:

When Ulrich looked at a blossom – which was not exactly an ingrained habit of this once impatient man – he now sometimes found no end to contemplation and, to say it all, no beginning either. If by chance he could name it, it was a redemption from the sea of infinity. Then the little golden stars on a bare cane signified 'forsythia' and those early leaves and umbels 'lilac'. But if he did not know the name he would call the gardener over, for then this old man would name an unknown name and everything was alright again, and the primordial magic by which possession of the correct names



bestows protection from the untamed wildness of things demonstrated its calming power as it had ten thousand years ago.<sup>199</sup>

The need I perceived in the forest was the opposite, to dispense with my in-built gardener, un-name the objects and retrieve the wildness. While considering how to do that I kept on taking photos and when the workshop ended I brought them home.



*fig. 44. Forest noughts and crosses, 2013*

Concluding the solution might lie in abstraction, I thought at first in terms of simple noughts and crosses, for there were so many variants in my images of both. (fig. 44) But that seemed inadequate to the forest floor's complexity, which is nearer to that of an oriental carpet, velvety and tufted, with a high thread count, intricately woven and old. Persian carpets frequently include identifiable plants and animals, but in

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<sup>199</sup> Musil, p. 1183.



other regional traditions such naturalism is absent or has evolved into formal, geometric motifs. Balance and poise is often achieved through mirroring about a central axis. Using the photos I adapted these principles, magnifying details and flipping the images to 'weave' some 'rugs' of my own. (fig. 45)



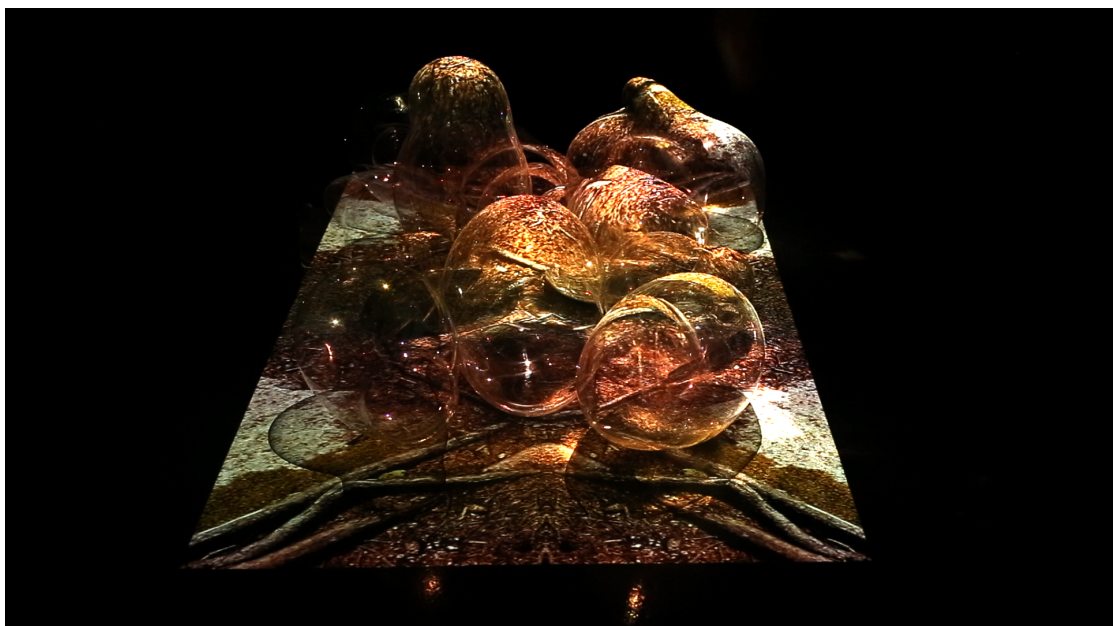
*fig. 45. 'Forest Floor Rugs' 2013, modified digital images (details)*



I was pleased with how the complex structure of the forest floor became simultaneously easier to see and harder to describe. But the symmetry undermined its unceasing changeability, making it seem timeless, tidy and resolved.

Still pursuing the analogy with carpets, I reflected on how they are stored in piles in shops. To see them, you turn back the layers one by one. I stacked the images laterally using video-making software, blending and extending them over time to make a two-minute loop of film. The idea was to capture the sense of moving, as the trail does through the forest, from light to dark, dry to wet, round and back again.

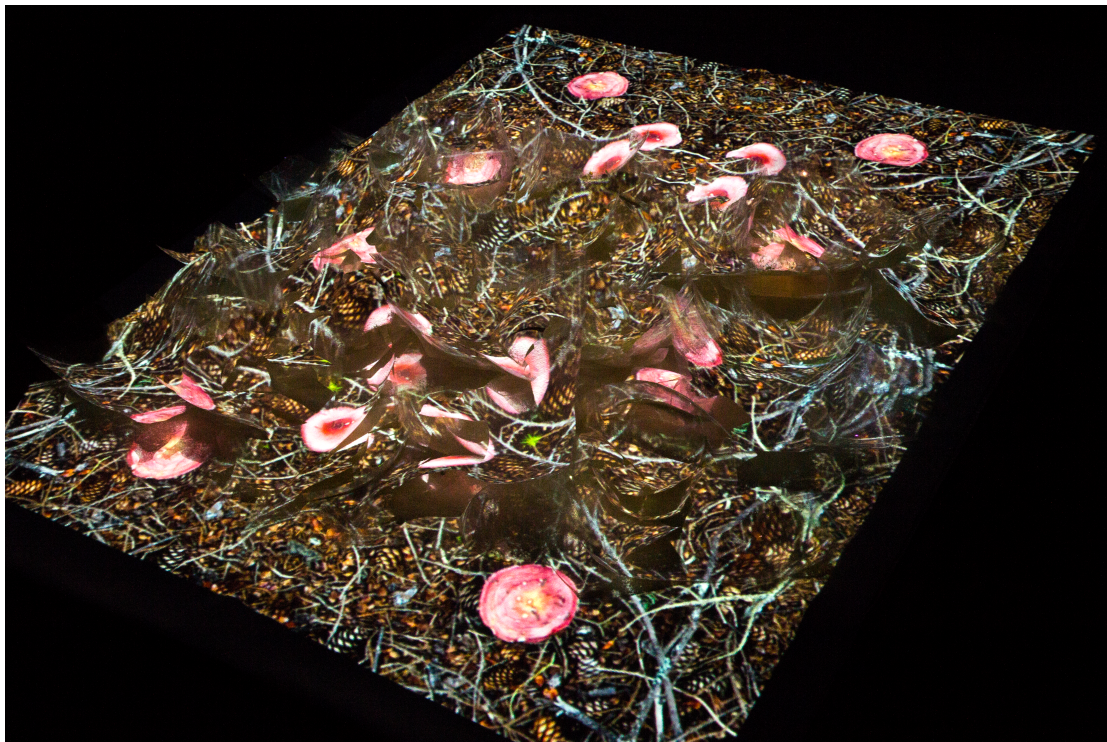
I thought about how the forest floor is continuously (re)-produced by processes of growth, disintegration and entanglement. In a blacked-out studio I placed a group of bubbles on the floor and projected the carpet video down onto them from the ceiling. I set up a camera to film the set-up from the side. Initially, the glass was invisible, the projection appearing flat. But as it ran, I sprinkled kitchen flour, which made the tops of the glass opaque, gradually emerging as ‘boulders’ that lifted the carpet off the floor.<sup>200</sup> (fig. 46)



*fig. 46. 'Boulders' 2013, video, 03' 32" (still image)*

<sup>200</sup> For the video itself, see List of Accompanying Materials

And then, predictably, the bubbles began to crack. While seeming to be boulders, they drew attention to the granite substrate of the forest and the aeons of incremental accretion that enabled it to grow. As shards they did the opposite, referencing superficial damage to the surface, as if a rainstorm or an animal had just passed through. (fig. 47)



*fig. 47. 'Fragmenting Forest Floor' 2013, digital projection onto broken glass shards with kitchen flour, 5' x 7'*

The installation was magical, but it was over and done in an afternoon, so almost nobody saw it. As I swept up afterwards, the ephemerality felt right, a fugitive glimpse of events that usually happen without any witnesses.

### **Reflections on the process**

At Haystack I was wary of being overwhelmed by the place, but in fact it was the glass that took charge. Montaigne writes (in an essay on the education of children) that his conceptions and judgment 'grope their way, staggering and stumbling and



tripping'.<sup>201</sup> Here, for me, the physical exigencies of the glass made that almost literally true. And my attention was of necessity so focused on the ground that it stayed that way well after the glass itself was gone.

My sense of the free and easy status of these bubbles and their wondrous ambiguity turned out to be short-lived. As I continued making them back in London I soon learned how to blow them 'better' (bigger, thinner, more evenly shaped), and thereby issues of skill and aesthetics came back into play. And I realised that their form is not in fact arbitrary, but has the anthropomorphic character of a shapeless Russian doll. This humdrum insight was hard to ignore, but it was also, paradoxically, something of a relief. For this project is not about finding a 'magic bullet' - a way to access place through glass that adapts to every case. I neither believe nor hope that that exists. But the protean qualities of the bubbles were initially so intriguing that it was tempting to see them in those terms and accord them too much power. Once the spell was broken they shrank back down to size, a wonderful resource to have as an option, but not one I would always feel compelled to use.

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<sup>201</sup> Montaigne, Volume 1, p.194.

## *Seven Broad Walk*

Studying the forest trail had turned out so rewarding that I was tempted to reprise the experience by following a new footpath in a different place. So in the first weeks after returning from Haystack I maintained the habit I had acquired of setting out at lunchtime to amble with my camera, focusing deliberately on the ground. I went most often to Kensington Gardens, which are directly opposite the RCA.<sup>202</sup> Like Haystack, the Gardens have a special history, but in origin and character they could hardly be more different. Created in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a series of Queens (Mary, Anne and Caroline) who lived in the adjacent palace, they are entirely artificial, conceived of and planted as a semi-formal park and intended specifically for people to enjoy. They have been open to the public for more than 200 years and are well used, like any urban park.

### **How it happened**

Recalling her childhood in the 1880s, Virginia Woolf contrasts the ‘colour-and-sound’ of summer holidays in Cornwall with the dullness of daily walks in Kensington Gardens:

The Broad Walk had a peculiar property – when we took our first walk there after coming back from St Ives, we always abused it; it was not a hill at all we said [...] The swamp - as we called the rather derelict ground behind the Flower Walk [...] we compared [...] of course, to the Halestown bog near St Ives where the Osmunda grew; and those thick ferns with bulbous roots [...]. It was natural always to compare Kensington Gardens to St Ives, always of course to the disadvantage of London.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> At the time the RCA’s glass studios looked out directly over the Gardens, but that is now no longer the case. The Ceramics & Glass department moved to the RCA’s new campus in Battersea in 2015.

<sup>203</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘A sketch of the past’, in *Virginia Woolf. Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Random House, 2002), pp.88-89, (originally published in 1939).

Walking through the Gardens that autumn I felt much the same, even regarding the Osmunda, which also grows magnificently at Haystack. Compared to the brilliant fecundity of Maine, the gravel and asphalt paths seemed shockingly barren, and I was so struck by the contrast that I could not see them in any other terms.

Even with strong motivation and expert knowledge of what one is looking for, getting one's eye in can be a struggle. Reflecting on a lifetime of spotting ore in rocks, the 19<sup>th</sup> century gold prospector Arthur Lakes wrote: 'Why! I, myself, old hand as I am, after being away for some months about town, or looking at other things, can't get my eye in and down to it for two or three days; then it kind of comes natural.'<sup>204</sup> For Virginia Woolf, who had no particular interest in the Broad Walk, the perceptual readjustment took several months: 'By degrees as the weeks passed the hill became steeper and steeper until by the summer it was a hill again.' For me, curious in principle but feeling sceptical, it took a week of lunch breaks to notice anything at all, and what I then found was unexpected.

In Kensington Palace in 2012 there was an immersive exhibition curated by Vivienne Westwood about seven princesses who lived there unhappily at various periods in its history.<sup>205</sup> The mysterious creations of that show reminded me of an illustrated book of fairy tales I had as a child.<sup>206</sup> And it seems the connection stuck in my mind. For in the Palace Gardens the following year I began to see those same imaginary worlds in small features of the ground. Cracks in the tarmac became horizons, hilltops and steeples, coloured gravel lit up cities, flattened discs of chewing gum turned to planets and a gate latch transmuted into a tiny hut. (fig. 48)

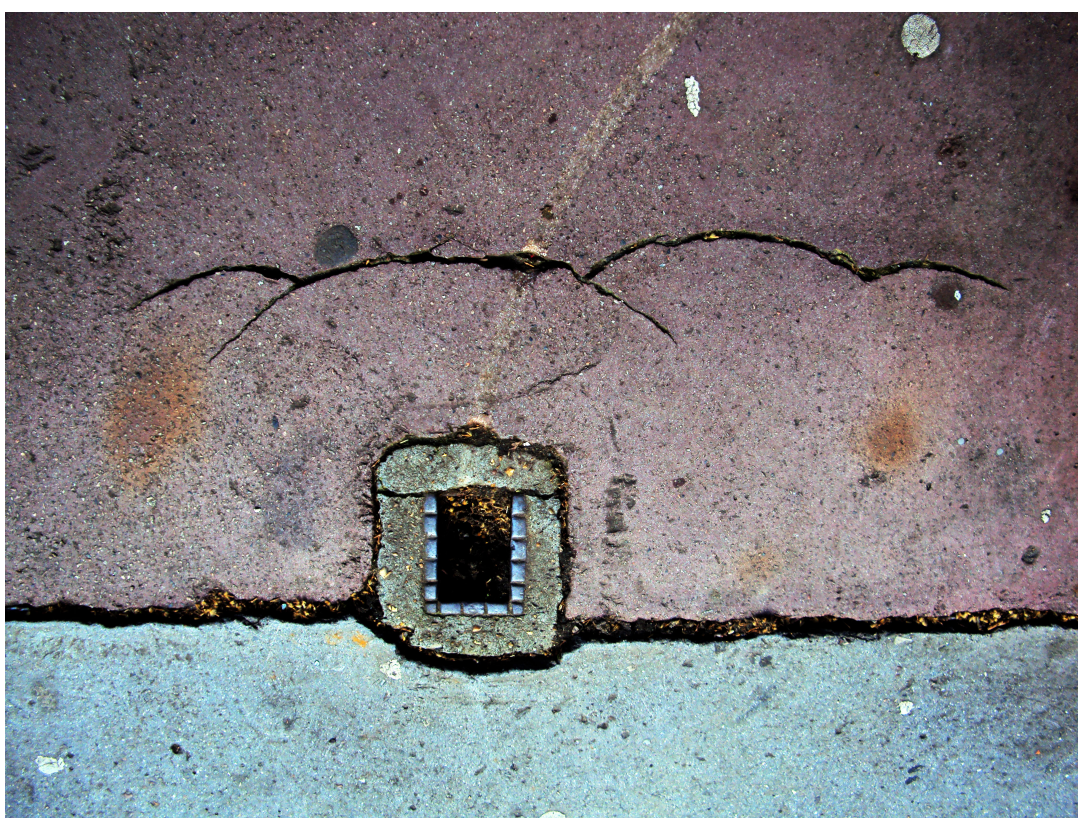
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<sup>204</sup> Arthur Lakes, *Prospecting for Gold and Silver in North America*, Second Edition (Scranton, PA: The Colliery Engineer Co, 1896), p.273.

<sup>205</sup> See exhibition review by Barbara Mack, 'The Enchanted Palace. A journey through myths and fairytales', February 2011, [www.londonhistorians.org/index.php?s=file\\_download&id=20](http://www.londonhistorians.org/index.php?s=file_download&id=20) [accessed 26.03.17].

<sup>206</sup> Kay Nielsen, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon. Old Tales from the North* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1914).





*fig. 48. 'Pavement Landscapes' 2013, digital photographs*

Such flights of fancy were not what I was looking for but they cheered me up, and I carried on with renewed enthusiasm to see what turned up next. At the bottom of



the Broad Walk there is a series of cracks in the asphalt that look like flowing lines of unfamiliar script. I searched for meaning in the scrawl but saw no words. Instead, another image, a leaping gazelle, which seen the other way round turned out to be a peacock, pecking at the ground. (fig. 49)



*fig. 49. "Incised" gazelle/peacock' 2013, digital photographs*



From art nouveau landscapes to cave art figures was quite a shift, but in other respects this was more of the same. Despite looking directly at the fabric of the Gardens, nothing I was seeing in it actually belonged there. As far as the aims of the project were concerned, I was still blind.

But then I came across something that drew my attention back down to earth. (fig. 50) It was a slim twig fallen from the trees that line the path, whose chance positioning - poised like a stylus - led me to consider what the cracks are actually about. For of course they are not as they appear, graffiti scratched into the surface. Rather, they're emergent, produced from within by expansion and contraction of the asphalt and upward pressure from the roots of trees that also drop the fluff and leaves, which, in turn, fill the cracks.



*fig. 50. 'Broad Walk 'Graffiti'' 2013, digital photograph*

To happen upon such an elegant case of Escher-like recursion<sup>207</sup> felt like a gift, as though I had been handed a special lens to dismiss the fantasy images and re-set my view. Close examination afterwards of my photos of the twig revealed traces of

<sup>207</sup> The specific reference in my mind was to MC Escher's lithograph from 1948 of a hand that holds a pencil that draws a hand that holds a pencil that....



other, more transient events - footprints, a squashed beetle, more chewing gum and a stain of something spilled. It was a compilation record of Broad Walk happenings, a co-production of plants, insects, people, materials, seasons, weather and habits, different from the Haystack forest, but just as complex.

The photo looked like a *trompe l'oeil* painting, except in one respect. As Norman Bryson points out, *trompe l'oeil* is artifice intended to deceive, objects are presented 'thrown together as if by accident, [they] lack *syntax*: no coherent purpose brings them together in the place where we find them'.<sup>208</sup> (fig. 51) What I had was the opposite, a genuine case of happenstance that appeared *as if* arranged. The implied authorship was, I felt, a pleasing nod to the fact that the layout of the Gardens was carefully planned, even if their use is casual.



fig. 51. Detail from 'Un-swept Floor' mosaic by Heraclitus (after Sosus of Pergamon), second century BCE, which Bryson gives as an example of *trompe l'oeil*.<sup>209</sup>

To push the formal reference further, I flipped the image to generate a mirrored symmetry, printed it in tiles and mounted them on the wall. I had to cut a hole to

<sup>208</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked, Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1990), p. 140, (Italics in the original).

<sup>209</sup> Museo Gregoriano Profano, Vatican [Source: Wikimedia Commons]

accommodate the light switch, but this cavalier treatment seemed not inappropriate for what was, in reality, just a shabby bit of path. (fig. 52)

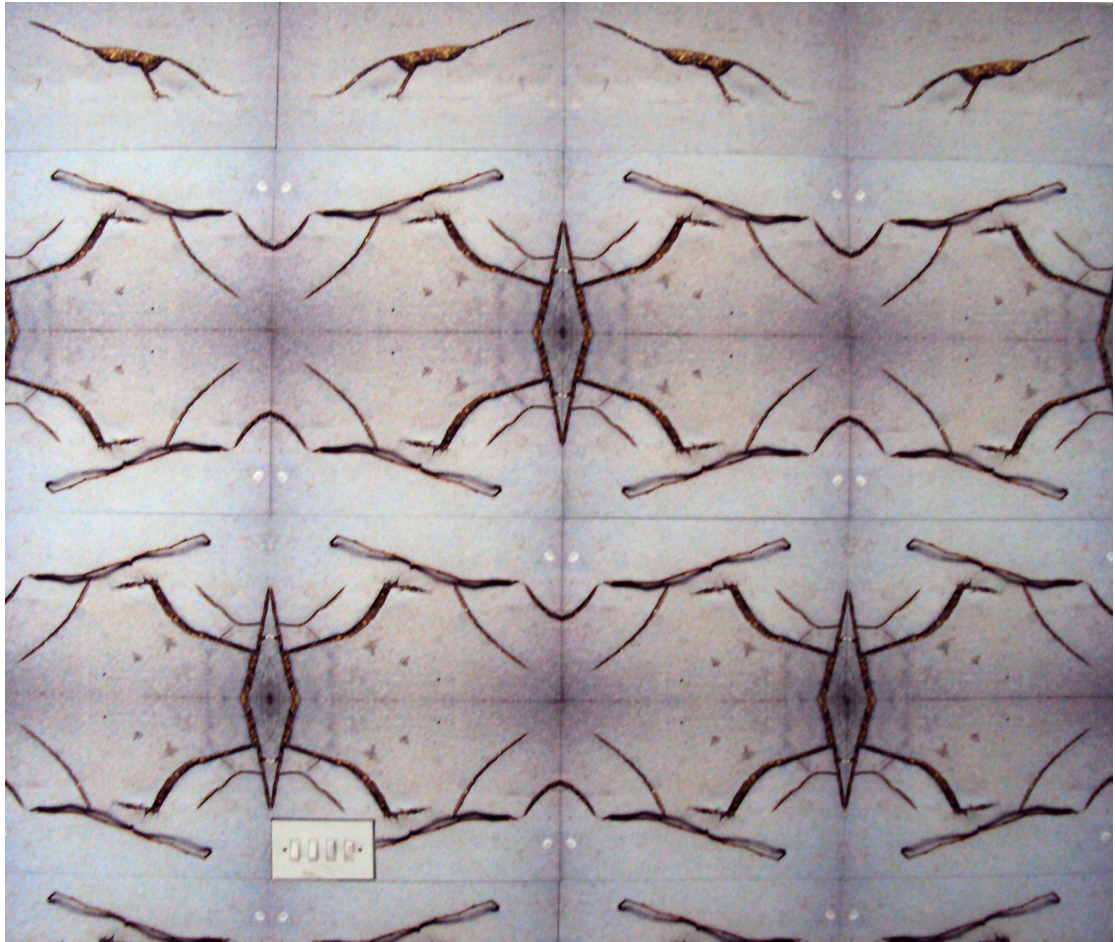


fig. 52. *'Broad Walk Pavement with Light Switch'* 2014, multiple photographs and plastic light switch, 6'8" x 5'4"

One thing still missing was a sense of the specific cultural load that differentiates Kensington Gardens (at least in my mind) from other urban parks. Despite the time I have spent there recently, my mental image of Kensington Gardens still has more to do with the clichés of its reputation than my own direct experience. And so, unfairly, I continue to associate it with nannies, primness, dogs and horses and the style and taste of a wealthy class. This, I guess, was why I thought of *Hermès* scarves and decided to make one of my own with the gazelle/peacock motif as a border round the edge. But printing the image on silk turned out to be a bad idea, more whimsical than witty, less sophisticated than I had hoped. The only person who

responded to it positively was an aristocratic friend who perceived my scarf as a personal joke and took it in her stride.

When a boat is steered too close to the wind, the airflow is disrupted, the sail starts to flap and 'luff' and the dynamic tension that makes the boat move forwards completely disappears. The flimsiness of the scarf made the whole conceit seem flimsy so I folded it up and put it away, unclear for the moment how else to proceed.

The following year I saw in the window of a secondhand shop an Edwardian occasional chair with a cloth-covered seat that needed re-upholstering. I thought at once of the silk, bought the chair and set about repairing it. Stretched tightly over the layers of stuffing the silk/asphalt glowed with renewed purpose and the sense of strain and split returned. The detritus in the cracks became the sawdust/horsehair innards, and the twigs implicit echoes of the arms. (fig. 53)

I do not know what kind of wood the chair is made of, but its form is not unlike the Broad Walk avenue trees. And its role, to be handsome and casually employed, is not so different from that of the Gardens:

The whole idea behind this type of chair is that sometimes it's tucked next to your entrance hall table, sometimes it's up against the wall [...] and sometimes it's in a corner [...]. The occasional chair is always waiting to be used when the occasion calls for it. It's the piece of furniture you can rely on to be there when you need it.<sup>210</sup>

At present it is on the landing half way up our stairs.

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<sup>210</sup> Tommy Smythe, designer, quoted in 'Upon Occasion'  
<http://www.houseandhomenashville.com/index.php/nashville-house-and-home-and-garden-articles/26-furniture/599-upon-occasion-occasional-chairs.html> [accessed 25 November 2015]





*fig. 53. 'Broad Walk Chair' 2015, wood and printed silk. 48" x 22" x 17"*

### **Reflections on the process**

I was aware of the interconnections between my essays, with questions carrying across and discoveries recurring. Nevertheless, each new exploration until this one had felt like a fresh start. This time that was not the case. On the rebound from

Haystack my perceptions were occluded, and nothing about the Gardens seemed fresh at all. Though it seems an obvious point, I hadn't realised until this happened how much relationships with places are like those with individual people. While each one is distinctive it does not happen in a vacuum, but is influenced by and intertwined with encounters and experiences in other times and places.

This project is concerned with efforts of attention that tap directly into the experience of a place. The idea of the silk scarf in this essay came from somewhere else. I knew I was defaulting to a lazy stereotype and felt uncomfortable about that even as I arranged to get it made. Maybe that is why it struck a false note. In contrast, the idea of upholstery came from nowhere, like a flash of recognition, the instant I saw the chair. My confident sense of a goodness of fit was a visceral feeling that had little to do with thoughts or words. Where things have gone well in these essays that seems to be the level at which they work. It is intuitive and elusive and not, it seems, something that gets easier with practice.



## *Eight bus journey*

The Overground essay was about separation in the encapsulated environment of a train. And trains themselves are isolated, running on dedicated tracks above, beneath or behind the backs of other things that happen. The woman on the bus in the Junction essay was also in some kind of private space, but the bus itself was not. A bus is leaky, permeable. It hosts and is immersed in a bundle of other journeys that intertwine at all levels, knotted most tightly in the busiest streets. A small boy behind me on a bus one day provided a monotonous commentary - 'start, start, stop, stop, start...' - that got me thinking about the reasons for the jerky metre of our progress. I set about unravelling the complex strands of a bus's journey by conceptually disentangling the multiple trajectories involved and mapping them on paper like a storyboard. (fig. 54) But this was a reversion to a mode of analysis that I already knew to be of limited use. So, again, I left my pen and went out to look instead.

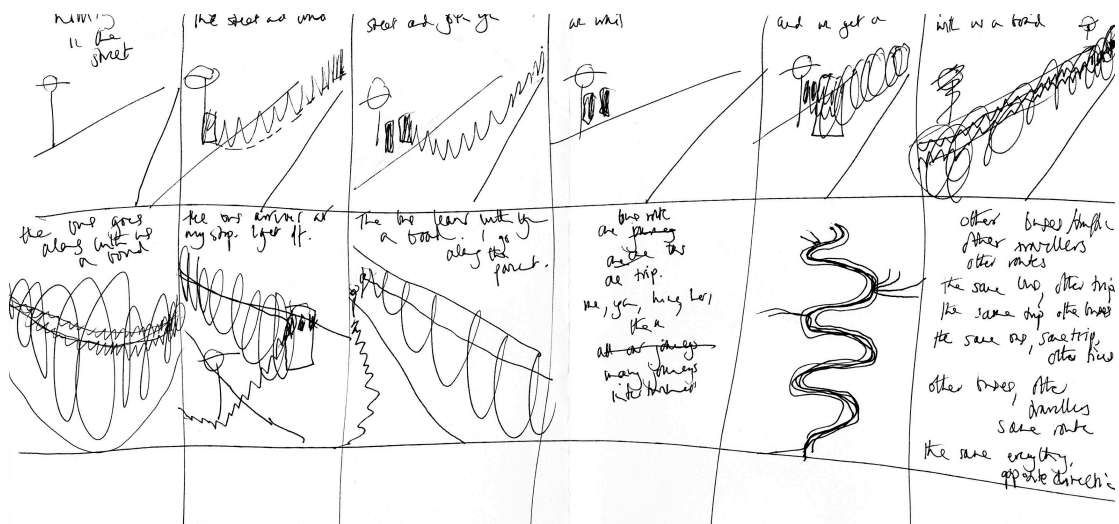


fig. 54. Attempt to unravel a bus's journey

### **How it happened**

At first I simply observed people flowing in and out, transforming as they came and went from passers-by to passengers to passers-by again. The driver's constancy

stood out in contrast. He was the one person bound to be present throughout. While watching him I also observed the CCTV screen behind his cab and was struck by the unexpected quality of its images. The bus was one of the new model Routemasters,<sup>211</sup> with retro décor in muted tones of red, green and beige and stylish shaded lights. The atmosphere on board those buses is quite unlike the playground brightness that currently prevails elsewhere. It has a cool precision reminiscent of Edward Hopper's paintings, which is intensified when processed through surveillance cameras and seen at one remove.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a fashion developed for admiring picturesque landscapes by viewing them indirectly, reflected in a blackened convex mirror known as a Claude glass.<sup>212</sup> The effect of the mirror was to narrow the tonality and compress and flatten the image, making it clearer and easier to see. The 19<sup>th</sup> century travel writer William Gilpin had a Claude glass mounted permanently on his carriage:

In the minute exhibitions of the convex mirror, composition, forms, and colours are brought closer together; and the eye examines the general effect, the forms of the objects, and the beauty of the tints, in one complex view. As the colours too are the very colours of Nature, and equally well harmonised, they are the more brilliant, as they are the more condensed. In a chaise particularly the exhibitions of the complex mirror are amusing. [...] A succession of high-coloured pictures is continually gliding before the eye.<sup>213</sup>

What the bus's cameras offered, it seemed to me, was the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital equivalent. It was not just the pictures but their multiple perspectives, which hollowed out the bus, making its walls and floors effectively transparent. The

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<sup>211</sup> Commissioned by Boris Johnson who was then the London Mayor, and designed by Heatherwick Studio, this bus was launched on the 38 route in 2012 and later adopted across much of London.

<sup>212</sup> The mirrors were apparently so called because scenes viewed with their assistance were thought to resemble landscapes by the 17<sup>th</sup> century French painter Claude Lorrain.

<sup>213</sup> William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views*, Volume II (Edinburgh: Fraser and Co., 1834) p. 233.

recordings presented a living, moving, compilation of the interior landscapes of each bus ride, incorporating traces of everyone and everything involved.

The images were not mine and I felt no need to have them, for they were already available, in real time, for anyone who chose to watch. Nevertheless I took a few still photos of the CCTV screen to see how they turned out. (fig. 55) Degraded by the double process and blurred by the vibrating engine, the results were pleasingly expressive, but they did not compare to the original footage. So I left the monitor and went to the upper deck.



*fig. 55. CCTV image of a moment in the journey, 2014*

Upstairs, I video'd a few brief sequences from behind of other passengers, heads swaying in unison, witnessing events together and sharing the delays. Then I went to the front seat and aimed my camera forwards, out of the bus. Again, as on the Overground, I was lucky with the weather. It was a dreary, wet, winter afternoon.

Through the steamed up windows the street below was a blur of indeterminate shapes, washed with colour by the changing lights.



fig. 56. 'View From the Bus' 2014, digital photograph

One of my photos subsequently won a prize in a competition entitled *Shooting the City*.<sup>214</sup> (fig. 56) It successfully draws attention through the rain-stained window to the street outside. But in terms of this essay that was not the point. I was much more interested in a video clip I had taken where the window glass itself provides the focus, a glittering plane on which the interplay of all the various forces behind the bus's halting progress shows up. In the video the bus travels about 150 metres and nothing unusual happens. (fig. 57) The soundtrack gives the precise location, being punctuated by announcements: '... 24 ... to ... Pimlico ... ... Horse Guards Parade ...'. In the murky obscurity there is little to be seen but looming lights and shades, whose rhythms highlight the interference of one force with another. At the start, for example, the bus is paused at a stop, so the fact the traffic lights are green makes no odds. It waits, motionless, until just when they turn red.

<sup>214</sup> Run by Westland Place Studios, London, June 2014.





*fig.57. 'Bus Journey' 2014, unedited video (first frame)*

The video in its unedited state was jerky, noisy and out of focus, so close to everyday experience as to hardly seem worth watching. So I experimented with ways to dispense with the naturalism, smoothing out the jerkiness, cutting out the sound cues and grouping the pixels into a mosaic. (fig. 58)



*fig. 58. 'Bus Journey' 2015, edited video, 2'47" (first frame)*



The benefit of making the piece more abstract was similar to what happened with the forest ‘rugs’. It became both less recognisable and easier to see precisely what was going on. Moreover, I discovered, pixilation works like a Claude glass, destroying the sense of depth, reconciling everything from a sliding drop of condensation to a passing lorry into a single shifting pattern. And this, in turn, frees the viewer to follow changes in a single tile of colour, as opposed to a descending drop of water or a light.<sup>215</sup>

A few weeks after editing the video I went to an exhibition of James McNeill Whistler’s atmospheric twilight London paintings from the 1870s, and recognised an echo of his work in mine. Whistler regarded each painting as ‘a problem that I attempt to solve’. He called them ‘nocturnes’. To him, a nocturne was ‘an arrangement of line, form and colour’ divested of any ‘anecdotal interest’. Whistler disavowed the idea of a musical connection - it was ‘an accident that I happen on terms used in music’.<sup>216</sup> But nevertheless his term gave me the idea of adding sound back in. Often, of course, being stuck on a bus that hardly moves is desperately frustrating. But if you have enough time to indulge the pace, the upper deck front seat offers a privileged eyrie of almost meditative calm. I chose a soundtrack that would induce this mood, a trombone solo from a languorous piece by Philip Sparke, appropriately titled ‘Interlude’.<sup>217</sup> For viewing, when the video was presented in a *Work in Progress* show, visitors were given headphones and an elevated stool to replicate the sense of separation from the throng.

### Reflections on the process

While I was engaged in this essay, the decisions I took felt quite specific to the situation and, in that sense, without precedent. But looking back afterwards I

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<sup>215</sup> For the actual video, see List of Accompanying Materials.

<sup>216</sup> James McNeill Whistler quoted in MacDonald, Margaret F., de Montfort, Patricia, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London: Philip Wilson, 2013), p.29.

<sup>217</sup> ‘Interlude’, second movement from *Year of the Dragon*, a piece for wind orchestra or brass band, composed by Philip Sparke in 1984.

recognised several echoes of previous occasions in terms of where and how I cast my eye, what caught my attention, the role of serendipity, and choices about presentation. In essaying, as in every form of exploration, you learn from experience, but not in a deliberate or systematic way. In Adorno's words, the essay 'corrects the isolated and accidental nature of its insights by *allowing* them to multiply, confirm, and restrict themselves [...] - whether in the essay's proper progress or in its [...] relation to other essays'.<sup>218</sup> What seemed to be emerging by this, my eighth attempt, were some recurrent 'ways of working'. These were not conscious principles but habits of practice and response, drawing on a growing tacit knowledge of what had turned out well (or not so well) before.

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<sup>218</sup> Adorno, p.164 (italics added)

## *Nine Atacama Desert*

To realise something is to understand it, to become aware. Realising can also be about making something manifest, giving it expression and form. This project is concerned with both processes. At different points they have been combined in different ways. In the first two essays I dealt with one and then the other - noting how things happen in a place and then trying to find ways to represent that. In the later essays the activities of discovery and presentation occurred in tandem, were concurrent in time and conceptually intertwined. This ninth and last attempt reverts to a two-stage sequence, not by choice but simply because that is how it came about.

I went on holiday in Chile to have a break before embarking on the final stages of writing up. But habits of attention, once acquired, are not easily switched off. In the Atacama Desert I was ambushed by my fascination with the strangeness of its places and came home full of insights I wanted to express. The first part of what follows tells what I learned about the textures of the desert in the three days I spent there as a tourist;<sup>219</sup> the second describes my subsequent attempts to present a sense of that in visual form.

### **Learning**

The Atacama is a plateau, 1000 kilometres long, bounded on the west by the Pacific and on the east by a chain of volcanoes that rise to 20,000 feet. It is the driest non-polar place on earth, rainless and lifeless, such that even bacteria are scarce and nothing decomposes. The structure of its crust is unlike anywhere else on earth. It is rich in minerals (particularly copper and saltpetre) and rare geomorphological forms (high altitude sand dunes, salt flats, geothermal fields, peculiar rock formations). Apparently the place it most resembles is the planet Mars, and being there I felt in some ways like a Martian observer. Arriving with no prior knowledge or

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<sup>219</sup> From information on the Internet, local guides, other tourists and my own experiences.

expectations I enjoyed the perceptual clarity of the novice, and everything seemed wonderfully fresh.

The activities for which the Atacama is known are mining, astronomical observation and tourism. As a tourist destination it is like an 18<sup>th</sup> century panorama, people go to be surrounded, to see and be amazed. And it is, indeed, amazing, but the experience is oddly skewed. Though a feast for the eyes, it is a famine for the other senses; there is nothing to hear, taste, smell or touch, except through the soles of your shoes. Even visually, there is plenty to look at but not much to *watch*. Between dawn and dusk little moves, apart from the shadow of the occasional cloud. There is nothing to interact with and no particular direction to go in, for the fabric of the landscape is continuously marvellous, stretching to the horizon all the way round.

The lack of specific things to do presents a marketing and management challenge for the local tourist agencies, which they have dealt with by selecting some conveniently accessible vantage points, investing them with status as named destinations, and choreographing visits, particularly at sunset, when the flaring and fading colours add shape and drama to the surrounding vistas. In the early evening these locations can be identified from miles away by converging lines of trucks and buses trailing dust. At other times they are invisible, indistinguishable from their surroundings except by indicative borders marked out on the ground. The whole purpose of these sites is organised looking, and that process is tightly managed.<sup>220</sup> Visitors are delivered, told which way to walk, how long to take and where to stop for photos, then collected at the designated point and time and driven off again. And it seems the system works. People are docile and co-operative. They migrate through crowded walkways to the edges of the sites and then take pictures looking

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<sup>220</sup> As tourist numbers have burgeoned in the last couple of decades, recognition and maintenance of these sites through controls on entry and prohibitions on trespassing beyond their edges has become increasingly significant for other reasons too. The sites are formally managed by local people, who act as warders and use the fees they collect to fund development projects. The rationale is one of three-way protection - of the desert itself from environmental damage, of local communities from unregulated tourism and of tourists from the hazards of the desert (which include unexploded land mines from border conflicts in the Pinochet era).

outwards of themselves and their friends, each apparently alone in an empty world.  
(fig. 59)



*fig. 59. Touristic images of the Atacama, 2016*



The tourist itinerary for the Atacama includes one place that does not fit with the rest on the list. This is the geyser field of El Tatio, whose erupting springs are fuelled by water heated by the neighbouring volcanoes. The critical moment for viewing the geysers is not sundown but sunrise, when the light illuminates the plumes of vapour and transforms the pre-dawn murk. So the cavalcade sets off in the middle of the night. Otherwise the arrangements are like the other trips - same guides, buses and passengers, wardens and regime: '20 minutes here, 25 minutes to get to there, you may bathe if you want, and then we'll leave at...'.

The whole point of the other sites is what you can see beyond them. El Tatio, by contrast, is close-up and immersive. It is a place of overwhelming multi-sensory engagement, of contradictory extremes, challenge and exhilaration all mixed up. The early morning air is freezing cold and swirls with sulphurous mists. Everything is wet. There is continuous enveloping noise from the roiling boil of 100 cauldrons beneath the ground, all bubbling to different rhythms. The water in the geysers is scalding hot; every few years somebody dies a terrible death after going too close and falling in. And yet, in the midst of all this there is a vast, warm pool, precisely calibrated to blood temperature, where people strip off when the sun comes up and lounge about like seals under glittering shafts of steam.

Elsewhere in the Atacama, things and people are clearly separate.<sup>221</sup> In El Tatio everything seems miscible. It's not just the ground that is porous, visitors fade into the mist, dissolve in the water and seem in the process to relinquish their self-consciousness. They still take pictures, but less often of themselves, and strangers watch each other as part of the scenery, integral elements in the texture of the whole. In contrast to the sterile vacancy of the other sites, El Tatio feels full of meaning. The Lonely Planet guide describes it as Dante-esque,<sup>222</sup> and that's what came to my mind too, though my knowledge about the *Inferno* is vague. (fig. 60)

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<sup>221</sup> Apparently even after death plants and animals mummify, remaining for centuries as dry husks on the surface rather than melding back into the land.

<sup>222</sup> <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/chile/el-tatio-geysers/introduction> [accessed 28.04.17]



fig. 60. Sandro Botticelli, 'Dante and Virgil Visit the First and Second Bolge of the Eighth Circle of Hell' c. 1485, silverpoint on parchment 32 x 47cm, Photo: © Kupferstichkabinett of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin

In other ways too, its passing visions are peculiarly reminiscent of the imaginaries of European art. The cheek by jowl juxtaposition of general hellishness with the indulgent languor of the warm pool made me think of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. And the pool itself combines the forms and colours of an Italian painted ceiling with urbane characters from Seurat's *Bathers at Asnières*. It is easy to forget that El Tatio is nobody's invention, just naturally occurring theatre with no plot. The spurious sense of moral portent that one experiences there is a kind of cultural mirage, different from the optical phenomena encountered elsewhere in the desert, but no less of an illusion.

## Presenting

In the limited time I spent in the desert I was more interested in being there than taking pictures. I still came home with plenty of photos, but most had been snapped without much thought. On my return to London I looked for the first time at what I had collected. There were some fine outward-facing records of the open desert landscape, all more or less identical to those posted on the web by other tourists who had visited the same viewing points under similar conditions. The inward-facing photos were more recognisably my own, small substantive details of the places we had gone to, including rusty panels of instructions, maze-like pathways and painted boundary stones, and I found myself tempted to try the same things with them as I had in previous essays. (fig. 61)



*fig.61. 'El Tatio Boundary Stones' 2016, digital image*

But none of these experiments came close to showing what I had in mind. For I really was not that concerned about the material features of the tourist's Atacama, neither what is defined as a sight to look at nor what physically delineates a site to



look out from. What fascinated me instead were the processes of looking that link the two, and how those processes are experienced. I realised what I needed to focus on were images of people, not of things.

Having decided what to work with, the question was how. I wanted to convey the sense of fabricated places, of experience contained in artificial form, and at the same time for both packaging and contents to be patently ephemeral, there and not there at the same time. I played with my photos in digital and printed form, cutting and combining, producing repetitive panoramas of people looking in, out and across, which I folded into boxes. (fig. 62) Some were open, empty, visibly fragile, others closed and deceptively solid, but I made them seem weightless by suspending them in the air. This experience of making was curiously like its subject matter, open-ended and disorientating, for I could not work out my own perspective on these boxes. It seemed impossible to choose a settled point of view.



*fig.62. 'Packaged Atacama Panorama' 2016, folded photographs, 11" x 11" x 7"*

While I was in the Atacama, it was the contrast between El Tatio and the other viewing sites that had helped me appreciate their respective characters. So I decided to work on two pieces together (one about El Tatio, the other a viewing site called Laguna Tebenquiche,<sup>223</sup> which I chose to represent the rest) and to focus specifically on how they were unlike. This defined a clear angle from which to approach them. I also thought that it would help potential viewers, for the two pieces seen together would provide yardsticks for each other.

Laguna Tebenquiche	El Tatio
Going	Being
Looking away from	Looking into
Empty	Full
Light	Weighty
Transparent	Translucent/opaque
Exposed	Veiled
Dry	Wet
Silent	Noisy
Still	Active
Can't see at all	Can't see across
Dimensionless	Substantial
Surface	Depth
Banal	Momentous

*fig. 63. Atacama places, dimensions of contrast*

I began by identifying abstract qualities of the two places as binary opposites (fig. 63), and then scoured my photos to find a picture that might stand for each whole list. I wanted to design each piece around a single, repeated image to reflect the textural homogeneity of the sites, the recurrent patterns of their usage and their overall simplicity of purpose. But I soon realised that for El Tatio that would not do - to express its astonishingly two-faced character there would have to be two pictures.

<sup>223</sup> The Laguna Tebenquiche is a hypersaline lake fed by groundwater of Tertiary and Quaternary volcanic origin. It the largest body of water in the Salar de Atacama, which is itself the largest salt flat in Chile. The viewing site is an area of land adjacent to the lake.



As I had hoped, working on both pieces in tandem clarified and magnified the differences between them, and it somehow encouraged me to make bolder choices. The photos I selected were close to parodies of the banal and the exotic. For the Laguna, a little girl with a tiny dog reminiscent of an advertisement from the 1950s for Start-Rite children's shoes. (fig. 64) For El Tatio, a combination of shrouded and naked archetypes, which channel thoughts of horror films and Michelangelo. (figs. 65 and 66) The Laguna piece presents a back view of other people on their way to enacting the project of looking, proceeding towards a horizon where they never actually arrive. With the El Tatio piece I chose instead pictures to draw the viewer in - joining the other watchers watching and also being watched – to a timeless state of equipoise that one feels might never end.



*fig. 64. 'Laguna Tebenquiche' 2016, digital photograph*



*fig. 65. 'El Tatio Geysers' 2016, modified digital image*



*fig. 66. 'El Tatio Warm Pool' 2016, modified digital image*

### **Reflections on the process**

Encountering a place so unfamiliar made this essay quite unlike the others. The issue was not just my own lack of knowledge but other people's too. The point about my investigations in the earlier essays was to challenge the blindness that comes from knowing somewhere, in a way, too well. When I thought about audiences with whom to share my insights, I took it for granted that they would

recognise my references and would extrapolate to their own experience of those places. But few people I knew in London had been to the Atacama Desert, so this time that would not work.

The Belgian psychologist Jean-Pierre Meunier wrote in the 1960s about modes of spectatorial consciousness associated with different cinematic forms including what he called film-souvenir (the equivalent of home movies) and documentary film.<sup>224</sup> According to Meunier, the function of the film-souvenir is incantatory. Its images act as an intermediary device through which the viewer evokes and identifies with a known person or remembered event:

The spectator's identification with - and of - the film-souvenir consists of [...] mobilising intuitive, synthetic and personal knowledge of the viewed person or event [...] The objectively specific images on the screen [...] are subjectively generalised by the spectator [...] to evoke the whole ensemble of a person's gestures and comportment or of temporal events surrounding those depicted on the screen. Thus, even as they retain the specificity from which their motivational power emerges, the images of the film-souvenir are not apprehended for themselves, but rather as [a] catalyst.<sup>225</sup>

With a film-souvenir we 'see' beyond its boundaries into our own life-world and thus a film-souvenir can work with almost nothing, since a fragment prompts the memory of so much more. By contrast, Meunier suggests, when we watch a documentary film about a previously unknown subject the boundaries of the screen are not transcended. We look not *through* but *at* the specific images presented and our knowledge is constrained by what we are shown.

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<sup>224</sup> Meunier's 1969 book *Les Structures de l'expérience filmique: l'identification filmique* is not available in English. I came across his ideas through reading Vivienne Sobchack, 'Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience' in Jane Gaines, and Michael Renov, *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 241-254.

<sup>225</sup> Sobchack, p. 247



In this project as a whole my search for small facets that might illuminate the whole is predicated on the principle of sparking recognition, much as happens with the film-souvenir. But with this latest essay I had inadvertently moved into documentary territory. Since what I presented could not draw on shared experience it had to be self-sufficient. I also realised that focusing in on the odd neglected detail would be meaningless if viewers did not know what it was a detail *of*. That is why on this occasion I used images with more comprehensive content than in any of the previous essays. It also explains why I chose to zoom right out, making pieces that presented the sites in their entirety, for viewing in the round. (fig. 67)



*fig. 67. 'Atacama Places' 2017, photographs, folded card, aluminium sheet, 4'6" x 3'0" x 0'6" and 5'0" x 1'4" x 1'0" (RCA Ceramics & Glass 2017 Summer Show)*

## 6 Reflecting (on)

To reflect something is to show, reveal, make manifest its character, to throw it back without absorbing it, to present it as an image. The aim of this project was to enhance appreciation of the world and its happenings by finding ways to reflect elusive qualities of place. I wanted to bypass language, to accommodate qualities that are known and familiar beneath the level of conscious thought but hard to describe in words. So instead I planned to work with properties of glass. I adopted the permissive principles and journeying precepts of the literary essay and embraced its reflexive character. But unlike other essayists who pursue their trains of thought in lines of words, my efforts of attention were more direct. I explored my chosen places physically, doing whatever being there generally involves whilst also noticing how things happen. The facets of place that I came to focus on in the course of those attempts are embodied in the visual pieces that accompany this thesis. Some images of these were shown in chapter 5.

‘Every essay’, says Lydia Fakundiny, ‘is the only one of its kind. There are no rules for [...] beginnings, or middles, or endings; it is a harder, more original discipline than that.’<sup>226</sup> And inasmuch as the journey follows neither recipe nor precedent, you travel blind. It is like playing ‘hunt the thimble’ without a sighted guide, not knowing quite what or where the prize is, or even if it will be found. On the other hand, as Adorno observes, ‘the essay, unlike discursive thought, does not proceed blindly, automatically, but at every moment it must *reflect on* itself.’<sup>227</sup> To reflect *on* something is to give it careful thought. When essaying, all the while you travel you are on the side lines too, watching and evaluating each twist and turn. You judge whether you are getting warmer or colder by how it feels, how near to something that seems right, and make your decisions accordingly. In Chapter 5 I described the process of my essays as accurately as I could, aiming to reflect what happened, why and how, and to give a sense of that experience. I also included some brief thoughts about where I had arrived or might go next. The purpose of this final chapter is to

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<sup>226</sup> Fakundiny, p. 4.

<sup>227</sup> Adorno, p. 170, (*italics added*).



stand back ‘after the fact, in tranquillity’<sup>228</sup> and reflect on the project as a whole and what it has produced. Firstly I look at what I learned about the processes of essaying and of making and discovery. Secondly I elaborate on what I came to understand about the role of glass. In the third and final section I return to the core objective of the thesis, my attempt to better appreciate place.

### **Essaying to essay**

When I first came across the idea of essaying, the approach seemed to fit my aspirations for this project very well. The tenor of the essay is positive and uncensorious; its prospectus is inviting. It suggests bringing to bear creatively every resource one has, in order to break with conventional ways of seeing and view things anew. In Adorno’s words: ‘Conceptually, it wants to blow open what cannot be absorbed by concepts [...] The law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy’s secret purpose to keep invisible’.<sup>229</sup>

For the reader, the ideal essay is easy and accessible. It ambles and meanders, apparently spontaneous, slipping effortlessly from a trifling starting point to somewhere more profound. ‘Of all forms of literature’, writes Virginia Woolf, ‘the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure [...] It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last’.<sup>230</sup> But the process of achieving all that is acknowledged to be hard. The dictionary defines the verb to essay as ‘to attempt (anything difficult)’.<sup>231</sup> The work of literary essaying tends to be framed as an heroic struggle, a strenuous endeavour. As the original

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<sup>228</sup> Donald A. Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), p. 26.

<sup>229</sup> Adorno, p.171.

<sup>230</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.13.

<sup>231</sup> Oxford English Dictionary

essayist, Montaigne set the tone, ‘groping’, ‘attacking’ and ‘stabbing’ his subject - ‘I squeeze it even to the bone’.<sup>232</sup>

Setting out on my own essays I felt ready for the challenge, but I soon realised that the process is more unruly than it looks. For while the essay may be famous for its wayward character, those one reads on paper appear fluent and complete. The hiatus that occurs when a particular idea runs out of steam is simply a line break between paragraphs. When that happens in reality, the realisation of what to do next may not come for weeks. Meanwhile, one frets. All the essays that reach the page seem to turn out well enough, presumably because those that fail never make it into print. But of course, in practice, some efforts come to nothing. And although essays come across as self-contained with clear beginnings and ends, that is often not the case. As I discovered, they can both start by accident and be difficult to stop, leaking into one another and getting entangled as trains of thought reverberate.

In choosing to follow my nose with no clear itinerary, I was hoping for rewarding encounters that could not be foreseen. The uncertainty I experienced was clearly part of the deal, but it was still unnerving, especially at first. Once I started to gain confidence that good things were happening, the erratic pace became easier to tolerate and even to enjoy. But to reach that point I had to unlearn much of what I had picked up about the literary essayist’s role. Phillip Lopate describes the essay as a ‘search to find out what one thinks about something’.<sup>233</sup> Whether the topic of an essay is personal or familiar, the author puts their mind to it and works the matter through. In this case, that would not do. The catalogue of the *New Topographics* exhibition discussed in Chapter 2 includes a quote from one of the photographers whose work was in the show. He said: ‘the world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions concerning it’.<sup>234</sup> I share his view. And since much of what creates that interest happens in its own time and touches us beneath the level of

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<sup>232</sup> Montaigne, Volume I, p. 401.

<sup>233</sup> Phillip Lopate, ‘In Search of the Centaur: the Essay Film’ *The Threepenny Review* (Winter 1992), 18-23, (p. 18).

<sup>234</sup> Nicholas Nixon, quoted in Barrow et al, p. 53.

conscious thought, trying too actively to engineer an understanding was never going to be the right approach. The stance I ended up adopting was not Montaigne's restless hunter, ceaselessly pursuing his quarry, but more like that of the Aboriginal tracker, Jimmy James, who bides his time, holding back: 'I never bend down low, just walk slow round and round until I see more'.<sup>235</sup>

### **From making to finding**

One sets out on an exploration not just with hopes and expectations but also luggage and equipment. My travelling bag, loosely labelled 'glass', contained a diverse range of optical instruments, concepts, tools, perspectives, methods of handling, and cultural and personal history. I was sure some of those would turn out to be helpful, though I did not know which. If other useful resources emerged along the way, I planned to adopt them too. I was also prepared to jettison any aspects of the glass that became too burdensome, and thought I knew what those might be. In particular I was wary of the power of made glass objects to dominate and distract attention. But, initially, I set my doubts aside. Coming fresh from working in a hot glass studio to a PhD by Practice in a School of Material, the obvious thing was to start by making, so that was what I did.

In the first two essays I attempted to embody qualities of place from my original vignettes directly in glass objects, one a blown vessel, the other a neon cartoon, and ran straight into trouble. As soon as the pieces were made, their corporeal features stood out as problematic. I tried to play these down and push them away, in the first case by thinking about the vessel more conceptually, in the second by concealing the form. But the difficulties could not be resolved by mitigation. As the architect Kengo Kuma says of his own early attempts to 'erase' buildings by

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<sup>235</sup> Suzanne Edgar, 'James, Jimmy (1902–1945)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, (Canberra: Australian National University, 1996) <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/james-jimmy-10607/text18849>> [accessed 02.07.17]

breaking up their outlines: 'there was something wrongheaded about first creating an object and then trying to make it disappear'.<sup>236</sup>

Kuma moved on from objects to atmospheres, designing architecture that was not intended to be seen from outside, only encountered from within. His porous and translucent walls and screens filter and refract external light and sound, blending the experience of the building with that of its site. Wherever possible, his materials (wood, stone, earth, bamboo) are sourced from the immediate environment, which further blurs the boundaries. Both sensory and material encounters are designed to facilitate active awareness 'of the subtleties of the seasons, weather [...] and human activities',<sup>237</sup> of the place.

inspired by Kuma's approach I experimented in the studio with screens and nets of glass. In the third essay I built a 3D model of the flows through a traffic junction that drew on these ideas. My intention was to scale this up to a room-sized environment in which the viewer would be immersed. But that raised new, more practical problems about the time, effort and expense required to produce such large amounts of glass, particularly handmade. I decided that in any case the piece was not conceptually strong enough to pursue, but my doubts about both the necessity and suitability of glass as a material for the project as a whole were growing. The gulf between how I imagined working with it and what was feasible in practice seemed too great. Its fleetness and flexibility is so easily envisaged, deceptively easy to conjure up in words. But capitalising on these properties in physical form is demanding, laborious and hedged about with limitations. I worried that my efforts to do so would slow the pace and set the terms of my explorations to an unacceptable degree.

Fortunately, an alternative was already to hand. Besides taking photos to conceal the nature of the glass, I was also using them to exploit it. In my open-ended

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<sup>236</sup> Kengo Kuma, 'Digital Gardening' *Space Design* (November, 1997), 6-9, (p. 6).

<sup>237</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Veils of Light: Kengo Kuma's Filters of Perception' in Kevin Erickson, *Kengo Kuma: 2007-2008 Plym Distinguished Professor, School of Architecture University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign* (Urbana Illinois: School of Architecture, University of Illinois, 2008), p. 22.

experiments I designed some luminous, translucent filters using photos of single pieces of glass reflected and multiplied in digital form. (fig. 68) But although these notional screens were striking, they had no obvious application.

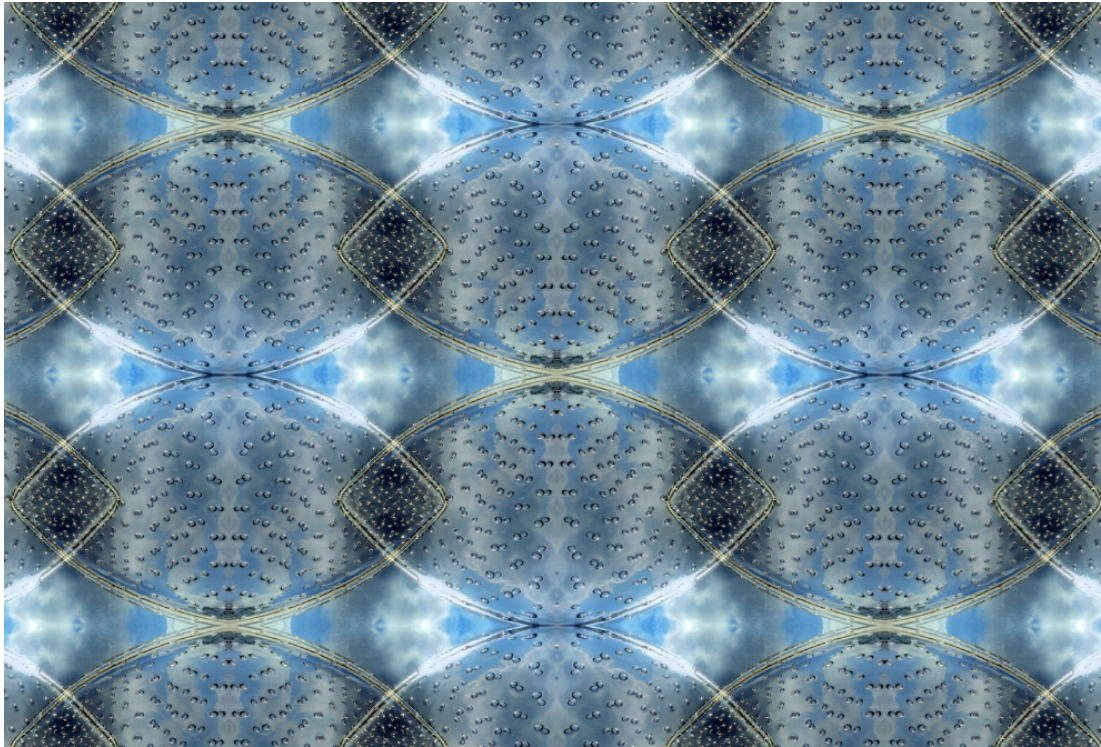


fig. 68. 'Glass Screen' 2012, modified digital image

The crucial advance came not from any of my photographs of *glass* but rather those of *place*. The casual pictures I took one evening of the traffic junction were intended simply as visual notes, but they altered everything. After spotting the woman on the bus I switched my whole strategy from making to discovering, from *representing* textures of place by constructing facsimiles to finding their manifestations in situ and *presenting* those directly. In lapidary terms, this was a major qualitative shift, like going from growing diamonds artificially to cutting and polishing facets of the real thing.

The local materials that Kuma uses are the substantive residue of events, the character and consequences of previous conjunctions embodied in physical form. The photos that became my building blocks are the digital equivalent, traces of



occurrences captured in their passing, but recorded in images, not stuff. Using photos had many advantages for the project, being much better fitted to its aims. They made the pieces I produced intelligible to others without the need for annotation. They enabled the places to speak directly for themselves, rather than being translated out and rendered back by me. Though I still selected the images and shaped their presentation, I was not responsible for their content, so the results were much more of a co-production, and with my authorial control diminished, chance played a greater role. The specific but arbitrary details caught in the photos give the pieces a casual particularity, such that they come across as examples of 'the kind of thing that happens', not as smoothed accounts of general principles. Since photos, certainly compared to glass, involve no obvious hand skills and are made with cheap materials, the risk of other people's attention being distracted either positively or negatively by the craft values of my pieces was much less. And since photos are so much easier to work with they facilitated the journeying. I felt more agile, able to go further, freer to look around. The difference showed up dramatically in the forest floor essay when, temporarily back with glass, I found myself cautiously walking backwards, eyes glued to the ground.

### **A glass sensibility**

The shift to using digital images changed everything, and not much. I did not from then on become 'a photographer', nor this a photography project, for it was informed by a 'glass sensibility' that went much wider than physical engagement with the material, one that drew, in fact, on the whole travelling bag.

In Chapter 3 I wrote about the ubiquity of glass in the contemporary world and its invisibility, how everyone uses it all the time without consideration, and how it shapes our thoughts without us noticing. The sociologist and glassblower Erin

O'Connor employs Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*<sup>238</sup> to describe the acquisition of her own more specialised version of embodied glass practice:

For the novice, her lived experience is likely to be informed, not from a lived practice of the meaning of the particular technique as it serves the whole, but from other areas of her life which help her to handle the newly encountered situation. Her adaptation is not wholly conscious; it happens at the level of the body [...] Through the adaptations, the glassblowing habitus begins to take shape and she develops 'a feel for the game'. As the novice progresses, her adaptations to newly presented situations in glassblowing are grounded less and less in previous non-glassblowing experiences and more and more in her solidifying glassblowing skills, accomplished through a process of bodily restructuration.<sup>239</sup>

The glass sensibility that I have identified derives, like O'Connor's, from lived experience.<sup>240</sup> Like hers, my experience comes partially from making glass, but it also draws more widely on every aspect of my life - as an ordinary citizen *and* glass enthusiast *and* specialist practitioner – that has to do with using glass or glassy ways of thinking. My glass sensibility is an orientation not a set of skills or practices, a combination of being alert to glass resonances and making decisions that amplify and bring them out. And as I anticipated at the end of Chapter 3, it is not entirely a matter of conscious choice. All the while I was trying to use glass to pursue my objectives, it was shaping my vision and approach. The metaphors of cutting and

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<sup>238</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). Habitus is conceived of as a system of embodied dispositions that organise the ways in which individuals perceive the world around them and respond to it. These dispositions are acquired through experience and shared with others of similar background. Habitus includes both physical tendencies to hold and use one's body in certain ways and more abstract mental habits, schemes of classification, appreciation, feeling, and action.

<sup>239</sup> Erin O'Connor, 'Embodied Knowledge in Glassblowing: the Experience of Meaning and the Struggle Towards Proficiency' *Sociological Review* 55 (2007), 126-141 (p. 132).

<sup>240</sup> Although my glassblowing experience fell well short of the '10,000 hours' of focused practice, reputedly required for technical mastery (see Anders K. Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer, 'The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance', *Psychological Review* 100 (1993), 363-406.)

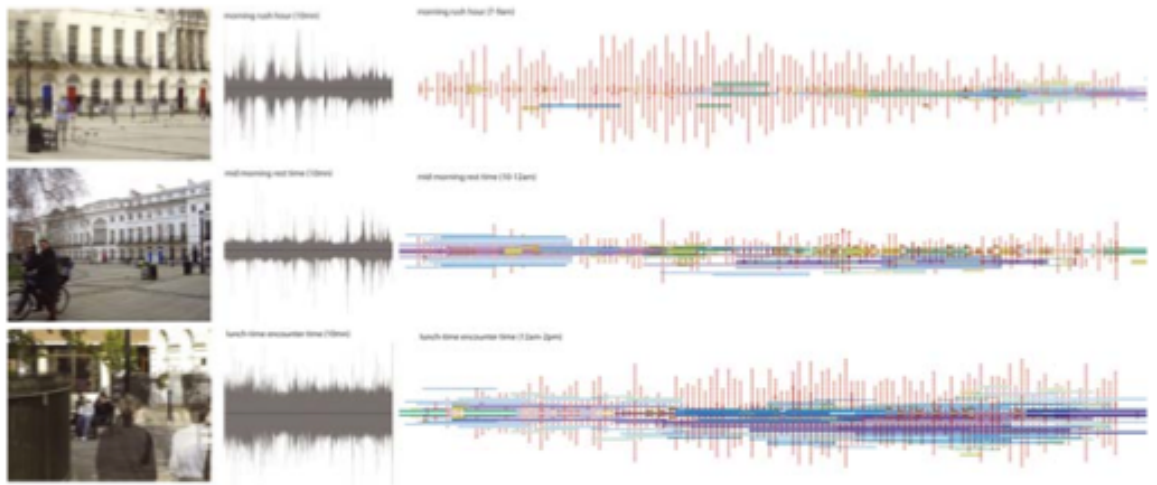
polishing, the search for transparent facets, blowing things up and shattering them, using mirroring and reflection in the photos and in other ways, they all come from glass. And it is also unexpectedly present in the pieces that resulted from the essays. For despite the fact that most of them contain no silica, they variously resemble familiar glass forms - a Moroccan lantern, a mosaic, a kaleidoscope, a stained glass window - in ways I was unaware of at the time of making. The paper boxes of my El Tatio geysers accurately mimic the refracting optics of cast glass blocks, but again I did not notice this until I placed them on a plinth amongst my fellow students' 'real' glass and ceramics and realised they looked quite at home.

The ghosting was not intentional and the nature of the references surprised me, being highly colourful and traditional in style, nothing like the excitable optics or cutting edge trickery I had imagined using. They involve aspects of glassmaking I have not had much to do with and cultural and aesthetic conventions I do not particularly enjoy. It feels, oddly, as though I have been channelling a glass sensibility that is not quite mine. And I suppose in the context of the project that makes sense, for the textural details that snagged my attention - a scratch in the tarmac, a fragment of detritus, a slipping raindrop, a glowing headlight – came from the places, not from me. It was *their* character not *my* interest which suggested the resonances that I then unwittingly pursued.

### **Facets of place**

At the start of this project I defined the distinctive texture of a place as being like that of a piece of music, an emergent quality that is generated over time by the combination and integration of everything that happens there. There is a rich body of writing and research that seeks to apprehend the complex intersecting rhythms of particular places through separating out and documenting the various component strands through measurement or description. Strategies have been developed to codify and represent 'the aesthetics of place-temporality' in visual

form, as for example through the use of spectral diagrams in Filipa Wunderlich's forensic analysis of the flow of events in London's Fitzroy Square.<sup>241</sup> (fig. 69)



**Figure 17.** Sound spectrum diagrams juxtaposed with place-rhythm spectral diagrams combining travel and social rhythms of Fitzroy Square at three different times of the day: morning rush hour (7–9 am), mid morning rest time (10–12 am) and lunch-time encounter time (12 am–2 pm). They show a direct link between the soundscape and the (frequency, intensity and duration of) rhythmic events; unique constellations of place-rhythms shape distinct soundscapes at different periods of the day in the Square.

*fig. 69. Filipa Matos Wunderlich, 'Sound-Spectrum Diagrams Juxtaposed with Place-Rhythm Spectral Diagrams', figure in 2013 journal article<sup>242</sup>*

But while conceptual frameworks of this sort may accurately record the facts of how things happen, they miss the timbral aspect, the sensory immediacy. To engage with that dimension, as I hoped to do, requires a different approach. 'Place', says Thomas Gieryn, 'has a plenitude, a completeness, such that the phenomenon is analytically and substantively destroyed if [its bundled features] become unraveled'.<sup>243</sup> My focus on facets was designed to avoid that happening. I aimed to capture a characteristic moment in the actual performance, not to explicate a section of the score.

<sup>241</sup> Filipa Matos Wunderlich, 'Place-Temporality and Urban Place-Rhythms in Urban Analysis and Design: An Aesthetic Akin to Music' *Journal of Urban Design*, 18 (2013), 383-408.

<sup>242</sup> Wunderlich, p. 392.

<sup>243</sup> Gieryn, p. 466.

The facets of place that I came up with are shown in fig. 70. In the first two attempts I missed the mark, for reasons already discussed. In the others I had more success, managing to identify some small but telling features and present them in ways that made them effectively translucent. Each one in its own way references and draws attention to more qualities of the place concerned than are actually shown.



*fig. 70. 'Nine Facets of Place' 2017, modified digital image*



The vignettes that prompted the start of this project all involved recurrent quotidian events. They had to do with physical occurrences and their manifestations in terms of sights, sounds, movements and conjunctions. Some were the effects of somebody's intention, others happened by chance. Some had intelligible meaning, others none. In some I was an active participant, others I merely witnessed. But all of them occurred during the minutes when I happened to be there. The textures of place identified in these facets encompass a much richer temporal range. They include not just things taking place in the present moment but also residues and traces of sustained change and its accumulating consequences accreted over days, years, even centuries in the case of the forest tilth. They also incorporate aspects of a more intangible character, not just what happens physically but how things feel and seem, are noticed or not noticed, by people taking part. Taken together, they provide what I was hoping for, some new awarenesses of place. But of course there is much missing, most obviously, anything involving sound, scent or touch remains entirely out of the picture.

The essayist Edmund Hoagland observes that 'the style of the writer has a 'nap' to it, a combination of personality and originality and energetic loose ends that stand up like the nap of a piece of wool and can't be brushed flat.'<sup>244</sup> That is true not just of writing but of creative work in any mode. It is the case for all the artists whose efforts of attention I discussed in chapter 2, and it was for my own earlier paintings. On this occasion, though, the nap appears to be rather short. As mentioned earlier, I was surprised by the nature of the glass that has shown up here, and there is little else about the style of the pieces that is either consistent or recognisably mine (though all incorporate photos and various forms of reflection). Considered together as a body of work, the facets I selected and their forms of presentation seem more diverse than coherent. But perhaps that is the point. A recent retrospective exhibition of the painter Michael Andrews included landscapes from Australia, Scotland, Norfolk and the Thames Estuary. His works are powerfully redolent of their respective localities. They are also worlds apart, as distant from one another in colour, tone and content as the places are themselves. The gallery

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<sup>244</sup> Edward Hoagland, *The Tugman's Passage* (New York: Random House, 1976). p. 25.

press release quotes Andrews as saying: 'It seems to me impossible not to paint religious landscapes of aboriginal Australia, just as it is almost impossible not to paint historical landscapes in Scotland.'<sup>245</sup> If the marvellous variety in qualities of place has likewise taken over in my work, I believe I should count that as a positive success.

My search for a richer appreciation of place was never purely for myself. I hoped also to create conditions that would facilitate other people's noticing for themselves. I suspected beforehand that this would be difficult, and the experience of this project confirmed my view. Several of my pieces turned out, for various reasons, to be just as fragile, ephemeral and site specific as the occurrences to which they referred. This was in a sense proof of fidelity, but it made them challenging to share. The final essay about the Atacama Desert was instructive in a different way. It led me to realise what now seems obvious, that my strategy of facets depends on Meunier's ideas of incantation, the cues to recognition will only work if the experiences they tap into are already familiar at some level.

### **Paying attention**

I knew from the outset that framing this undertaking as a PhD project would add constraints and expectations, but I hoped the impact would be positive. It has certainly resulted in a more thorough effort of attention than I might otherwise have managed to sustain. It also made me acutely conscientious, sometimes almost cripplingly so. Without the sense of having to continually scrutinize and account for my decisions, I would certainly have produced different and most likely freer work. But in fact the meticulous documentation of the processes of noticing has been a crucial part of the project, and one that I think adds value to it.

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<sup>245</sup> Michael Andrews, quoted in press release for *Earth, Air Water* exhibition, January 20 - March 25 2017, Gagosian Gallery, London. <https://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/michael-andrews--january-20-2017> [accessed 03.07.17]

All the artists whose projects of attention to place I discussed in Chapter 2 have commented on the challenges and difficulties experienced in getting to grips with their subject matter. Some argue that the character of the struggle is expressed by and embodied in their pieces. But in none of the finished work I came across, apart from Perec's book, is it explicitly spelled out. Nor is it in my own. Like well-crafted essays, my 'polished' facets convey little sense of the crooked path to their production. Indeed, if anything, they actively deflect attention from the problem of trying to pay attention, since they manage that challenge on the viewer's behalf.

As noted in the Introduction, the intellectual and political arguments for a conceptual shift in how place is envisaged have been strongly made. In academic discourse the revised conceptualization whereby places are regarded as verbs not nouns, meshworks not networks, emergent not fixed, contingent not agreed etc. is accommodated (so long as the will is there) by the simple act of switching metaphors. But however thoroughly persuaded we may be, actually attending to our experience of familiar places in this radically different way is acknowledged to be much more difficult.<sup>246</sup> The account given here provides a case study of one person's efforts to do that. While the substantive details are specific to my experience, both the problems I encountered and ways I found to deal with them offer insights about a challenge that is of wider interest.

## Conclusion

It is said that an essay should reflect the character of its subject matter, and in this case that is true. As I read back over the final draft of the thesis I realised that almost every quality of place I mentioned in the early chapters can be found here too. This project has itself become a place - both noun and verb - in all but the most literal of terms. It is somewhere to which I brought all sorts of things initially, but in which I have come across a whole lot more. What has happened has been

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<sup>246</sup> Psychologists would argue that it goes against the grain, not just in terms of culture - how we have been brought up to think - but also our visual and cognitive make-up, the physiological basis of our thought. See, for example, Wolfgang Metzger, *Laws of Seeing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), (originally published 1936).

powerfully shaped by the contingencies of its, and my, location in a particular cultural climate, time and space. I have spent a lot of time developing and caring for it. Often it has felt like a refuge, occasionally a prison. But it is more of a garden than a building, open to the elements, ideas grafted, grown from seed or with cuttings acquired from elsewhere. While some of them have failed to thrive, others have flourished, taking over more than their anticipated space. The whole has evolved organically, unpredictably, never quite under control. The concept of completion makes no more sense than it would in a garden, where everything changes and there is always more to do. This conclusion may mark the end point of this particular enquiry, but in doing so it also clears new ground to start the next.

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## Note

This note tries to address the question that came up in Chapter 2 (Attending to Place), when I noticed how much of the work that caught my interest had been produced by men.

I first investigated the possibility of working with glass in the early 1970s, but for various reasons the idea was not practicable and I did not follow it up. I thought no more about it for the next 35 years. In 2008, being increasingly frustrated with academic research, I was looking for something different to do that did not depend so heavily on words. I had good reasons for choosing glass, but in one sense not previously discussed in the thesis the specifics of the material were irrelevant. I also wanted to become more self-sufficient, and anything new that was challenging to learn might potentially have served as well in that respect.

At that stage in my life, almost everything I did required good skills of mediation. These were as crucial to my professional role as an evaluator of policy initiatives as they were to living in a family.<sup>247</sup> And when I was not mediating I was often looking after, whether as teacher or supervisor, daughter, mother or friend. Everything I was involved in seemed inextricably connected to other people's moods and circumstances - how they were getting on with themselves or one another. As antidote I wanted something I could fully own, where both successes and disappointments would be down to me alone, not dependent on anyone else.

Having previously thought a lot about inter-personal and inter-professional relationships, both mine and other people's, I aimed in this project so far as possible to put those on hold. In relation at first to glass and later on to place I was interested to explore my capacities and develop my understanding as a person, not in any particular role. It is arguable that the weight of connectivity from which I sought emancipation is gender linked. Certainly, I think, it appears more

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<sup>247</sup> I spoke about this in a keynote speech to the UK Evaluation Society: Charlotte Humphrey, 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy: reflections on the role of the evaluator. *The Evaluator* (Spring, 2008) 11-14.



preoccupying for women than it does for many men. And if that is the case, then perhaps it helps explain why the work on place that I was drawn to - which did not show that pressure - was made disproportionately by men.